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Sare-e-Naz





# Saru-e Naz

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AN ESSAY  
ON LOVE AND THE REPRESENTATION  
OF EROTIC THEMES IN ANCIENT IRAN

ROBERT SURIEU

ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY JAMES HOGARTH



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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*Here now is the sixth volume of the series "Unknown Treasures". If it is true that troublesome children are often closest to their parents' hearts, the publisher must feel a special affection for this his latest born; for few books have given so much trouble with the provision of illustrations. Material for the later period is abundant, though the extreme licentiousness of much of it has obliged us to be severely selective in its use; but the position is very different with objects and paintings of the early period, which usually show undue discretion in representing the pleasures of love.*

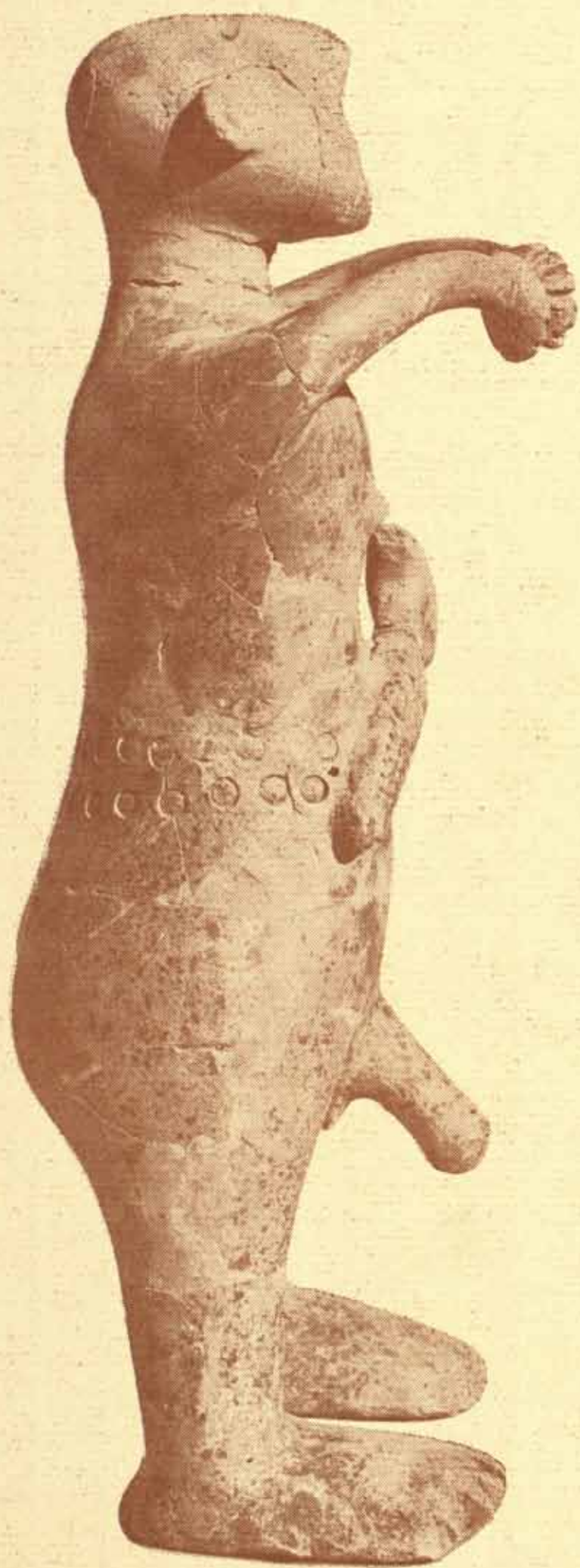
*We are, therefore, particularly grateful to all those who have helped us in our arduous quest and have contributed, either in a private capacity or in the course of their official duties, to the production of this book.*

*We should like to thank in the first place Their Excellencies Mr Ghassem Rezai, Iranian Minister of Tourism, and General Hassan Pakravan, Iranian Ambassador in Pakistan, for the ready and effective help they have given to any of our publications concerned with Iran.*

*Mr Mohsen Foroughi and Professor and Mrs Mohsen Moghadam of Teheran have given us access to their collections and have assisted us with inexhaustible patience throughout the preparation of this work. To all of them we express our sincere and grateful thanks.*

*Finally we must also thank M. Etienne Dennery, Administrateur Général of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Mr Can Kerametli, Director of the Museum of Islamic Art, Istanbul, and Dr Mehdi Bayani, Director of the Imperial Library, Teheran, who have facilitated our work by so readily allowing us to examine all the treasures entrusted to their care.*







## PROLOGUE

*In few civilisations has love in all its various aspects played such an important part as in that of Iran.*

*Gradually freeing itself from the legacy of prehistoric rites directed to securing the fruitfulness of the species and the proper balance of the universe, the cult of love developed in the early period, under strong Hellenic influence, towards the courtly ideal which seems to have prevailed in the feudal society of the Arsacid and Sassanian empires and in the early centuries of the Caliphate.*

*The advent of Islam led to the birth of a new culture, born of the encounter between the old Aryan heritage and the new monotheistic religion from Arabia. In this union love attained a stature far surpassing that hitherto accorded to it. Transcending the pleasures of the flesh and the exaltation of the sense of beauty, it became in the teachings of the sages a means of philosophical perception and of mystical fulfilment, which in addition provided the central theme of one of the richest bodies of poetry in world literature.*

*Yearning always for the absolute, and refined by thousands of years of spiritual and artistic striving, the Persian soul is nevertheless very far from despising the ordinary human joys: indeed it displays infinite ingenuity in savouring them in all their range and variety. We shall see that the greatest poets of Iran accepted and appreciated all the different forms of love, seeing in each of them a fresh means of fulfilment, no matter whether they ran counter to the strict laws of morality or were exalted by the sublimity of their object.*

*Throughout its history, and particularly in the Islamic period, Iran alternated continually between times of glory and of distress: now basking in the splendour of a great empire, now racked by invasion and war. The vicissitudes of their existence built up in the people of Iran a deep insight into the relativity of things, so that they not only yearned for the ineffable satisfactions of the life beyond but were eager to enjoy to the full all the delights offered by the passing moment. Persian sensibility oscillates continually between these two opposing poles. It is expressed in the mystical odes of Sa'di, but also in the licentious*

*works of the same great poet; in the most delicate miniatures and in some of the pictures reproduced in this book. But in all these manifestations it is still the same sensibility; and it will be one of the objects of this book to demonstrate this.*

*It is right to add that this essay and the illustrations which accompany it are concerned with the past; for although modern Iran, re-shaped by the movement of rebirth begun by Rezâ Shâh after the first world war, has jealously preserved its own distinctive spirit and the best features of its traditions, its manners and moral standards are very different from some of those described in these pages.*

The passages quoted from Persian writers are based on French translations by J. Darmsteter (the *Avesta*), H. Massé (*Vîs and Râmin*, Auhadî, Sa'dî and Farrukhî), G. Lazard (Rûdakî and 'Attâr), R. Lescot (Hâfiz and Omar Khayyam) and the author.



## ANCIENT IRAN

We have very little in the way of written or pictured material from ancient Iran on the subject with which we are concerned in this book.

From the prehistoric period and the earliest historical period we have a few objects in terracotta, bronze or ivory, no doubt associated with fertility rituals designed to ensure the proliferation of crops, of flocks and herds, and of the human species. For the most part they are statuettes of the Mother Goddess, who at a later stage became identified to some extent with Anahita, the Mazdian divinity of water which was the source of life, who—as Darmsteter, the translator of the *Avesta*, notes—was more closely related to Diana of Ephesus than to the Venus of the Greeks.

This divine being, who was worshipped throughout western Asia and whose origin is lost in the mists of prehistory, is generally represented by the stiffly posed figure of a naked woman. The sexual parts are emphasised; the breasts, often supported by the hands, are opulently formed, and the hips and buttocks are correspondingly generous. The figure is sometimes decorated with tattooing and adorned with massive jewels, necklaces and bracelets. Clearly the primitive artist, moved by magical and religious impulses, is concerned to stress all that is feminine in the figure, all that appeals to man's instincts and holds promise of abundant fruitfulness.

It is probably the same goddess who appears, embraced by her male consort, in scenes of hierogamy or sacred marriage represented on terracotta fragments of the third and second millennia found at Susa. And it is certainly she who is shown on certain bronze votive pins from Luristan in the act of bearing a child; the child's head is just emerging, and the mother's fingers are drawing milk from her breasts.



Another series of objects belonging to a very early period—statuettes, amulets and pieces of pottery—appear to reflect similar preoccupations in relation to the male generative force. Such, for example, are the little figures with an erect phallus found on sites in the Khurvin area (about first millennium B.C.) or the necklaces in the Foroughi collection with pendants in the form of ithyphallic figurines (Amlash, ninth or eighth century B.C.).

There are also clay and bronze vases in the form of the male organ, which in all probability were used for magical libations designed either to stimulate the vigour of the man or to promote the fertility of the woman. A similar significance can be attributed to a prehistoric dish from Persepolis, the rim of which is decorated with a series of figures in attitudes which would undoubtedly appear equivocal were they not, in all probability, part of the ritual of some sacred dance.



The *Avesta*, the sacred book of Mazdaism, is our oldest written source on the formation of the religious and moral ideas of Iran. It casts a few rays of light on the amorous practices of those distant times, which differed very little from those of more recent periods. Consider, for example, this picture of life in the women's quarters, depicting the wives of those righteous men who were rewarded for their upright life by wealth and happiness:

"Their wives await them, seated on the bed. Fair they are, reclining on their cushions, adorning themselves with bracelets on their arms, heavy square ear-rings, and necklaces worked in gold. 'When will he come,' they say, 'the master of our house? When will he come to satisfy his desire on the body he loves so well?'"

All the speculations of the *Avesta* are directed to the struggle between the power of good which is the creation of Ahura Mazda, the god of light, and the power of evil represented by Ahriman, the spirit of darkness. On this conception are based a complex ritual and a system of ethical rules designed to ensure that at the end of the day this cosmic conflict should result in the triumph of good over evil. One of the prime obligations of the believer is to do all he can to promote the multiplication of the good species such as cattle and dogs and, most important of all, the human species. The act of love is thus to be recommended, but solely for the purposes of procreation: "The worst action which can be committed by men or princes is to leave maidens without husbands, condemning them to spend long years unwed."

Purity—and particularly the purity of women—is maintained by a code of strict rules. Thus it is an almost unpardonable offence to have anything to do with a woman who "has a show of blood" or is pregnant, for in the latter case it "may be the worse for the woman or for the child". In the former







case the guilty man must "offer up a thousand head of small beasts... supply to the (sacred) fire a thousand loads of tender wood... make up a thousand bundles of *baresman*<sup>1</sup>... offer a thousand libations to the good waters... kill a thousand snakes of the species which crawls on its belly and two thousand of the other species<sup>2</sup>, a thousand land frogs and two thousand water frogs, a thousand of the ants which steal grain and two thousand of the other species<sup>3</sup>, cast thirty bridges over canals, receive a thousand strokes of the *aspahê-ashtra*<sup>3</sup> and a thousand strokes of the *sraoshô-carana*<sup>4</sup>."

The magnitude of the acts of expiation required is an indication of the seriousness of the offence. A memory of this taboo is preserved in *Vis and Râmîn*, a courtly romance adapted by Fakhr al-Dîn Gurgânî from a Pahlavi original in the eleventh century of our era. Vis, having married her own brother—a union which according to the ideas of Mazdaism was not merely lawful but was regarded as particularly sacred—found herself prevented on her wedding night from yielding herself to her husband. And from this all her misfortunes began:

"For in the night when Viru became a husband, when all were making merry at his wedding, the bride found herself in a certain condition, so that ill fortune befell her husband. A decree came down from the firmament which made it impossible for them to enjoy one another. The weakness of humankind opened up the bride's white body, and the pure lily became stained with blood. So Vis, the fair one, spent an evil week: it was as if a heap of rubies had turned into liquid. When a Mazdian woman is in this condition her husband abstains from all commerce with her; if the woman concealed her state from him she would become for ever prohibited to him."

In addition to impure intercourse, the *Avesta* condemns with extreme severity any practices which serve to make love sterile—for example abortion, prostitution and unnatural vice: "If a man has commerce with a maiden, whether she be under her parents' authority or not, whether she may have been delivered up (to a husband) or not, and if he gets her with child, he must not say to her 'Ask the old woman for one of the drugs which bring on an abortion', but must maintain her until the birth of a child."

It is not surprising to find, in a religion which attached extreme importance to fruitfulness, that similar obligations apply "in relation to all females, whether with two legs or four: whether it be the woman, the female with two legs, or the bitch, the female with four legs". And the sacred text goes on

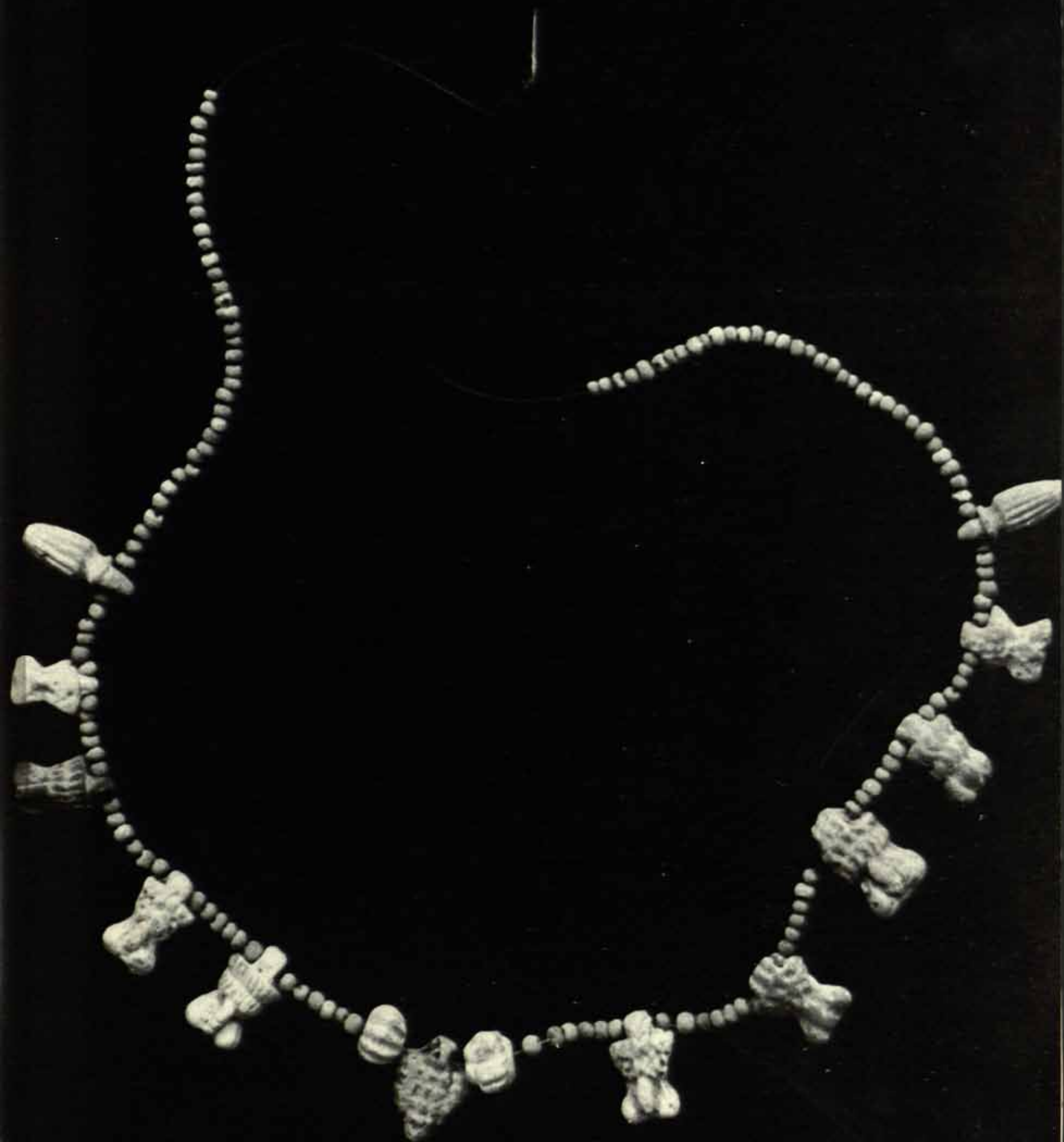
<sup>1</sup> A bundle of twigs held together by the leaves of the date palm: an object which played an essential rôle in the cults of ancient Iran.

<sup>2</sup> A reflection of the duty imposed by Mazdaism to exterminate creatures belonging to the domain of Ahriman, the power of evil.

<sup>3</sup> A whip.

<sup>4</sup> Another kind of whip.









to give detailed guidance on what the believer should do to protect and help the bitch in bearing her pups.

The *Avesta* expresses particular abomination for prostitutes, who seem to have existed in considerable numbers, and draws a lively portrait of the type. Among the eight characters which it attributes to the dog—an animal which nevertheless was held in high respect—is that of the courtesan:

"He likes to sing like a courtesan; he does injury to all who approach him, like a courtesan; he wanders at large on the roads, like a courtesan; he is ill bred and capricious like a courtesan. In all this he shows the character of a courtesan."

And elsewhere we find this:

"Zarathustra asked Ahura Mazda: 'O Ahura Mazda, who afflicts you with the worst affliction? Who makes you suffer with the worst suffering?'

"Ahura Mazda replied: 'O Spitama Zarathustra, it is the *jahi* who mingles within her the seed of the good and the evil, of the idolators and those who are not idolators, of the sinners and those who do not sin.

"Her glance dries up a third of the powerful waters which flow from the mountains, O Zarathustra; her glance blights in their growth a third of the fair golden-coloured plants, O Zarathustra.

"Her glance withers up a third of the vigour of Spenta Armaiti, O Zarathustra. Her approach withers up a third of the believer's good thoughts, of his good words, of his good deeds, a third of his strength, of his victorious vigour, of his holiness.

"I tell you, O Spitama Zarathustra, such creatures are more fit to be killed than the vipers, than the howling wolves, than the wild she-wolf which descends on the farm, than the frog with its thousand young which descends on the waters."

The violence of these imprecations suggests that the prophet Zoroaster, like so many other reformers, did not find it easy to control the practice of the oldest profession in the world.

The sacred book pronounces the same maledictions on those who commit the sin against nature as on women of light behaviour:

"Creator of the world of bodies, O holy one! If a man commits the sin against nature, being compelled to it, what shall be his punishment?"

"Ahura Mazda replied: 'Eight hundred strokes of the *aspahê-ashtra*<sup>1</sup>, eight hundred strokes of the *sraoshô-carana*<sup>2</sup>.'

"Creator of the world of bodies, O holy one! If he commits it voluntarily, what then shall be the payment? What shall be the expiation? What shall be the purification?"

"Ahura Mazda replied: 'There is no payment, no expiation, no purification: his crime is inexpiable, for ever and for all time to come.'

"Creator of the world of bodies, O holy one! Which is the man who is a demon,

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<sup>1</sup> A whip.

<sup>2</sup> Another kind of whip.



which is he who sacrifices to the demon? Which is the man who is the incubus of the demon, who is the succubus of the demon? Which is the man who serves as a woman to the demon? Which is the man who is no better than a demon, who is wholly devoted to the demon? Which is the man who is already a demon before he dies, and who after his death becomes an invisible demon?"

"Ahura Mazda replied: 'The man who invests the male or who receives the male, O Spitama Zarathustra. That is the man who is a demon, that is the man who sacrifices to the demon; that is the man who is the incubus of the demon, who is the succubus of the demon; that is the man who serves as a woman to the demon; that is the man who is no better than a demon, who is wholly devoted to the demon. That is the man who is already a demon before he dies, and who after his death becomes one of the invisible demons, whether he be a man who invests the male or one who receives the male.'"

A later commentary notes that "any passer-by may, of his own authority, kill the guilty man who is caught in the act."

It is, of course, a well-known fact that the promulgation, in any civilisation, of measures of such extreme severity is merely an indication of the inability of the religious or civil law to control the practice in question. This was probably the case in ancient Iran in relation to homosexuality and prostitution. And although Herodotus justly notes that "there is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians" and that "they practise every species of pleasure which comes to their notice", he is perhaps claiming too much for the cultural influence of his own country when he goes on to add: "For example, they take their pleasure with boys, a practice which they learnt from the Greeks. In addition they each marry several legitimate wives and purchase a still larger number of concubines."

This perversion, so vigorously and so vainly condemned by the *Avesta*, is illustrated as early as the eighth century B.C. by two seals in the Foroughi collection. There is no doubt, however, that the adoption of Hellenic fashions, which grew steadily in popularity from the time of the Achaemenids to the accession of the Sassanians, did something to purify and refine the character of the "love of boys", preparing the way for the rôle it was to play in Islamic Iran.

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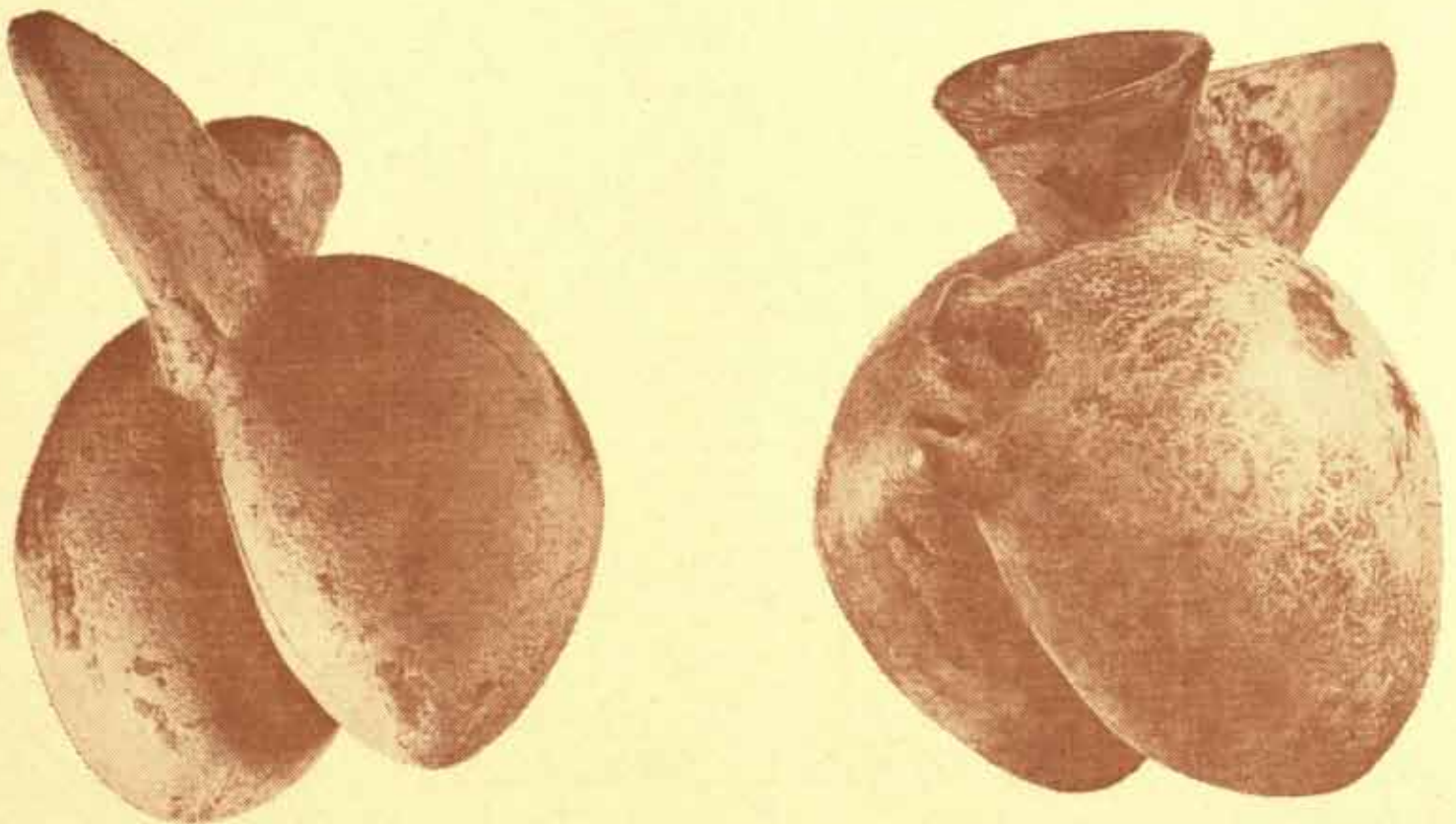
The silence of the Iranian sources up to the Islamic period means that for nearly a thousand years our only evidence comes from a few references in the classical authors. Apart from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, which contains a number of charming anecdotes—perhaps tinged a little too strongly with Attic salt—illustrating the customs of Iran in its contacts with Greek civilisation, it amounts to but a scanty body of information.



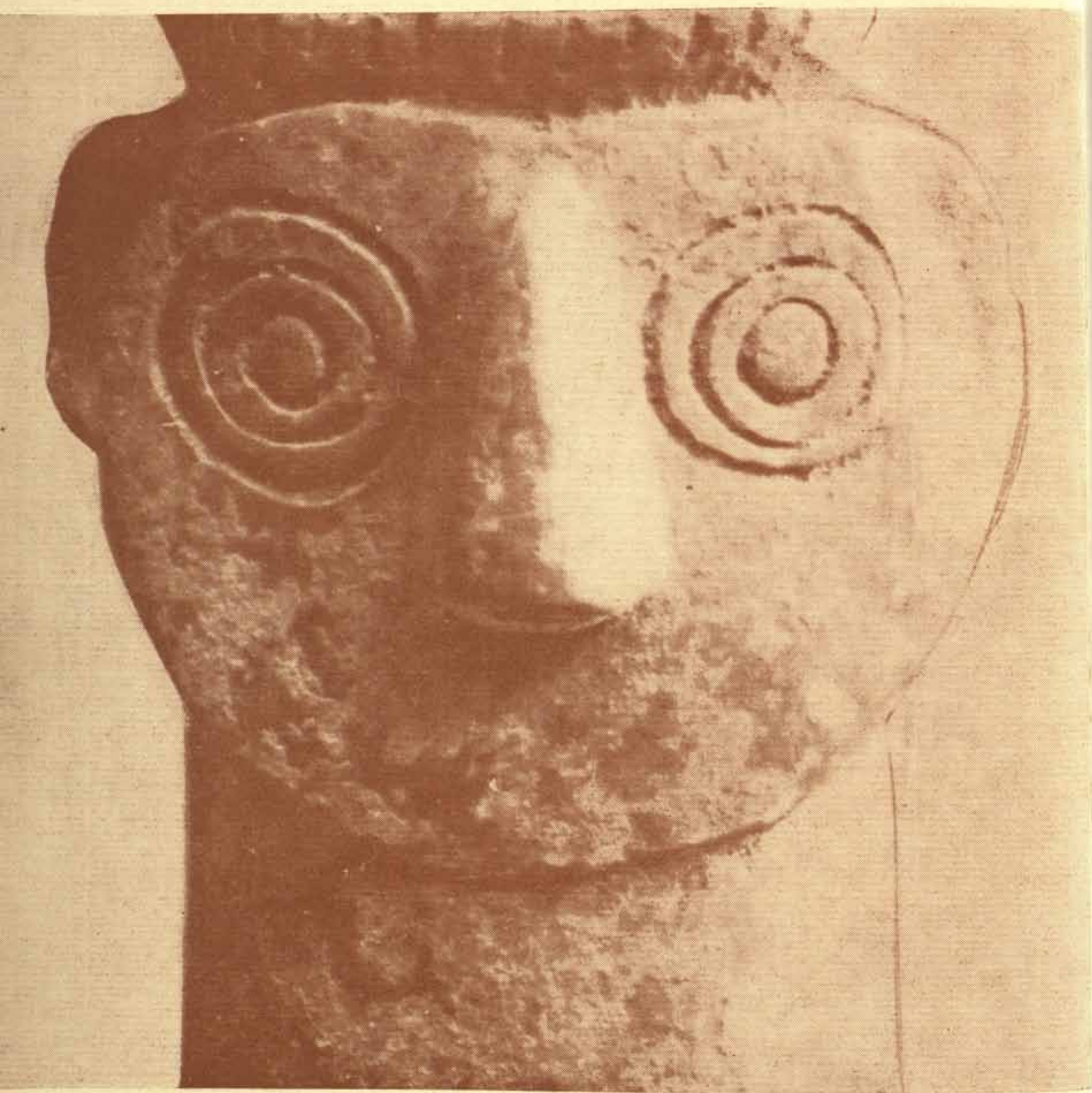
Chares of Mitylene tells us the tale of the love of Zariadres, brother of Hystaspes king of Media, for the Princess Odatis, a romance which was celebrated by the Persians "and was represented by them in paintings in their temples and palaces, and even in their private houses"—an important reference which bears witness to the existence of a body of courtly poetry as well as a school of painting of which nothing has survived.

Recounting the victories of Alexander, Quintus Curtius sketches a rapid picture of Cyrus's harem following the Great King to the wars: "All the women of the household of the queens followed on horseback... then came the king's concubines, to the number of three hundred and sixty-five, and all arrayed like queens." Alexander himself, reports the same historian, was soon to adopt a similar pomp and circumstance, and to surround himself with a no less numerous retinue of women, to the great scandal of his army.

The European travellers of the seventeenth century give us, in much greater detail, similar pictures of the retinues of the Safavid rulers, carrying on the traditions of the Great Kings after a whole series of intervening dynasties. In this respect, therefore, there was nothing new under the sun of Persia over a period of many centuries.





































A few scraps of evidence from the Sassanian period, like the figures of dancing girls in diaphanous veils represented on the sides of some silver vases, give us some indication of the style of beauty which was then favoured.

Our last piece of evidence from the ancient authors comes from Ammianus Marcellinus (fourth century A.D.), who spent many years campaigning against the Persians in the Roman Imperial armies. Unexpectedly, his account is in contradiction with Herodotus. "The Persians," he says, "give themselves up without restraint to the pleasures of the senses, and they can never have concubines enough to satisfy them. But they are not given to relations with boys (*puerilium stuprorum expertes*). Each man marries as many wives as his means permit, but in consequence of this plurality has little affection to spare for each of them."

We shall encounter almost identical observations at a later period in the accounts of European travellers, with the exception of the "*puerilium stuprorum expertes*".

\* \* \*

The year 641 saw the downfall of the Sassanian dynasty at the hands of the Arab invader, at the battle of Nehavend. The conquerors imposed their Semitic and monotheistic religion, sweeping away the old beliefs and introducing patterns of life, of thought and of feeling very different from those which had developed under the influence of Mazdaism and its derivatives. And, no less significantly, a new idiom was created by a process of osmosis between Pahlavi and the language of the Koran.

All the evidence goes to show, however, that the passage from the ancient civilisation to a civilisation based on Islam was achieved not by a sudden break but by a gradual and harmonious development. Accordingly the Caliphs themselves quite naturally took over the etiquette, the usages and the refinements of the splendid monarchy of which they were the heirs by right of conquest. Though several centuries lay between the two, the court of Hârûn al-Rashîd, as it is depicted for us in the *Thousand and One Nights*, is still a reasonably faithful reflection of the court of the last Iranian emperors. And if this is true of the court, it is all the more true of the provincial princedoms within Persia which had remained almost independent, and the cities lying off the main lines of communication, which long preserved—in spite of a steady process of islamisation—the habits, the tastes and the ideas of the older order. This is demonstrated, for example, by the anxiety shown by the peoples of these backward areas to safeguard part of the literary heritage of Iranian antiquity by transcribing it, with varying degrees of fidelity and reliability, into the language of their own day.







## COURTLY LOVE

We have thus a whole series of neo-Persian literary works which enable us to picture for ourselves, or at least to imagine with a reasonable degree of accuracy, the way of life of the aristocracy of the last centuries of Mazdian Iran, and probably also of the early years of Islamic Iran. These are the epic poems and a number of courtly romances in verse, such as the *Shâh-nâma* ("Book of Kings") of Firdausî, *Vîs and Râmîn* by Gurgâni (1010–1074), *Khusrau and Shîrîn* and the *Haft Paikar* ("Seven Portraits") by Nizâmî (1141–1204), to mention only a few.

These works depict a brilliant court life made up of sumptuous banquets, prolonged carousals to the accompaniment of music and singing, games of polo, and hunting and warlike expeditions organised with a degree of luxury equal to that of any palace. On these expeditions the king and his suite were accompanied by huge baggage trains of servants and musicians, well supplied with carpets and furniture, so that they could find in their richly embroidered tents all the comforts of a town. Great festivities were held, lasting for weeks at a time, to which guests flocked from every corner of the empire, and at which each man vied with the other in luxury and ostentation.

At this period women were not excluded from these pleasures, as they were later to be. They were present at the festivities, and sometimes even took part in the more active forms of entertainment like hunting, or indeed in fighting, if we are to judge from the example of some of the princesses in the *Shâh-nâma* who were ready to buckle on a breastplate and brandish a sabre for an encounter with the most valiant champions of the day.

The famous Bisutun carving shows a hunting party in a swamp, with a boat-load of women musicians playing their instruments in the midst of the elephants and the panic-stricken wild boars. And whenever Bahrâm Gûr went hunting he was accustomed to take his favourite with him on the crupper of his dromedary.











Thus although the women of the aristocracy were required by their rank to maintain a dignified reserve, they were nevertheless able to appear in public, and had sufficient freedom to allow them, if favoured by chance and assisted by male enterprise, to become involved on occasion in amorous adventures. As a rule they fell in love at the first glance, and thereafter could not rest until they possessed the object of their passion, sticking at nothing in order to achieve their aim.

The *Shâh-nâma* tells how Manijeh, daughter of King Afrâsiyâb, poured a sleeping draught into Prince Bijan's wine and had him brought to her apartments and kept there. Rudâbeh, likewise a king's daughter, sent her waiting-woman to her loved one, Zâl, to conduct him to her pavilion; and then, from her balcony, let down her jet-black hair to the ground so that with its help he might climb up to her room. The gallant Zâl, however, preferred to use his own rope for the ascent. This escapade was followed by a marriage and by the birth of Rustam, the most valiant of the captains celebrated by Firdausî.

The characters of the *Shâh-nâma* are more concerned with fighting than with seduction; they go in for no great subtlety in matters of love, and their ideas of sentiment are fairly rudimentary. These warriors are concerned with women only as a recreation after their campaigning, when they may procreate a noble and vigorous posterity to pursue their martial exploits: "Women in this world have only one virtue," says the poet somewhere, "—that they can give birth to lions." Thus in the Iranian epics we find none of the fine-drawn passions which are for ever suffering difficulties and setbacks. An exception, perhaps, is the guilty passion felt by Sudâbeh for Siyâvush, the son of her husband. The prince having virtuously repulsed her advances, she was filled with jealous fury and had him exposed to ordeal by fire: a test which he withstood in the most edifying fashion. But this Persian Phaedra remains the single exception, and her sisters in the "Book of Kings" invariably offer the most sublime examples of fidelity and devotion, even though they may sometimes have disregarded the proprieties in order to give themselves to the hero whom their heart had chosen.

\* \* \*

The courtly romances, taking themes treated by the Moslem poets on the basis of models of the Parthian and Sassanian periods, reflect a gentler way of life, and we even find an attempt—no more than a passing phase, it is true—at an idealised picture of a woman's love. We shall summarise briefly the two most characteristic works of this type.

The story of *Vis and Râmîn* begins with a description of the celebration of the rites of spring at the court of the King of Kings, Maubad. All the ladies of the court are present at the ceremonies, and with them are some ladies who have come from a great distance, for "the fair ones of the world,







beautiful as the fairies have ever been", are taking part in the festivities, forming the brightest adornments of the tournaments, the balls, the pleasure trips and the feasts.

Captivated by the charms of his vassal Princess Shâhru, the king pays court to her and asks her hand in marriage. The princess rejects his suit, but promises him her daughter, if ever one should be born to her. This light-hearted exchange, however, is destined to have the direst consequences; for to the princess is born a daughter, the unhappy Vis. Who her father may have been we are not told: certainly Shâhru—



perhaps a widow, or a discarded wife—is free of all conjugal responsibilities. When Vis reaches marriageable age her mother, forgetting her promise, gives her to her own son, Viru (for, as we have already noted, such consanguineous marriages were encouraged by Mazdaism). The marriage is not consummated, for the reasons already mentioned (page 12 above). Meanwhile, however, Maubad has taken up arms in order to enforce his claim. After a number of warlike episodes Shâhru comes to terms and yields up her daughter. The young princess thereupon sets out for her bridegroom's capital, travelling in a litter under the escort of Râmîn, the king's brother and her own foster-brother. The two young people have long since forgotten one another, but destiny is lying in wait for them:



"When the decree of heaven was close at hand—namely that Râmîn had attained the full measure of his joy, that the fire of love would burn in his heart, consuming his reason and his constancy—there arose an impetuous spring wind which tore open the curtains of the litter one by one. Then it was as if a sword had been unsheathed, or the sun had emerged from the clouds: the maiden's fair face appeared from within the curtains, and on beholding her Râmîn's heart was conquered. It was as if a sorcerer had appeared, and with a single glance reft his soul from his body: had it been caused by a poisoned arrow-head the wound could not have been dealt more swiftly, for when Râmîn saw his fair one's face it was as if an arrow had pierced his heart. He fell from his horse, as from a mountain, like a leaf torn from a branch by the wind: his heart was afire."

Vis remains faithful to Viru and refuses to yield herself to Maubad. She persuades her nurse, who is not without skill as a witch, to prepare an amulet which will protect her from the king for a year—thus allowing sufficient time for reflection—and can then be destroyed. The talisman is buried in the bank of a stream and is soon carried away by flood waters; and since it has not been destroyed it remains permanently in effect. Meanwhile the amorous Râmîn has had little difficulty in securing the interest of the nurse, who had of course nursed him as well as Vis. But Vis, still faithful to her brother Viru, at first indignantly rejects the edifying advice she receives in such terms as the following:

"What is the good of possessing a face as fair as the sun, if your beauty does not enable you to attain the object of your desire? Never having experienced this pleasure, you do not realise that without it this life is devoid of all charm. The female was created by God for the male: and you yourself, are you not a female born of a male? The wives of the great and of famous men, of the men of power and the men of wealth—all are rejoiced, all possess a husband, young like the myrtle or the box-tree or the cypress; and each of them, while possessing a husband who is known to all, also has a lover in the utmost secrecy. Thus according to their whim they hold in their arms now their lord and master, now their beloved. And so, though you might possess all the treasures of kings, you would not attain the object of your desires if you spent your life without either husband or lover."

To bring matters to a head the perfidious nurse arranges that on a day of festivity Vis is placed in a position where she cannot but admire Râmîn, whom hitherto she has barely glanced at. Love is at once victorious, and when the unfortunate Maubad sets out for the wars a few days later the two young people meet. A few brief words of courtship, and the irreparable occurs:

"As Vis resisted the encounter in the field of joy, Râmîn inserted the key of his desire in the lock of pleasure, and so became still more enamoured of his charmer because his bond bore the divine seal. He pierced the fair pearl of great price, and freed the virgin from her abstinence. When he withdrew his arrow from the wounded place both the arrow and the target were covered with blood. And as for the charming Vis, wounded by the arrow, the desire of her heart was quenched by fatigue;





and both of them having satisfied the desire of their heart, their love was strengthened thereby. So for two months they remained thus, seeking only pleasure and the desire of their heart."

Henceforth Vis and Râmin are unable to control their desires. They have recourse to every expedient which allows them to meet; and Vis is even ready to leave the warm bed of her dreary husband in the depth of winter and take her pleasure on a mattress of snow:

"Casting off her fur cloak, spreading it out amid the mud and water, and throwing on top of it the skin of a black fox, she freed her body of its garments and relieved her heart of its griefs. The two lovers held one another close, as in spring we see the rose and the lily, as Jupiter is united with the moon, or as the flame clings to the straw...

"In their bliss they exchanged sweet murmurings, and in the extremity of pleasure they formed but a single body. Now it was Vis who made with her arm a pillow for both of them; now it was Râmin. It was like the mingling of sugar and wine, or as if silk and coarse cloth were spread out together; they were entwined as closely as two snakes. O the sweetness of the moment when a lover and his mistress lie close in each other's arms! Their lips were joined, they lay face to face, so close that









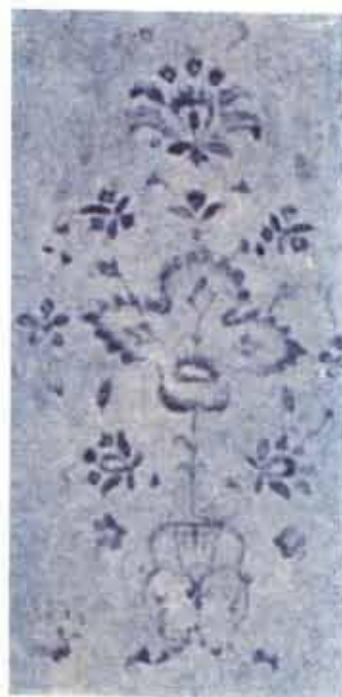








دینار کبیر و دینار  
و عادی از کلام بشارت میگرد



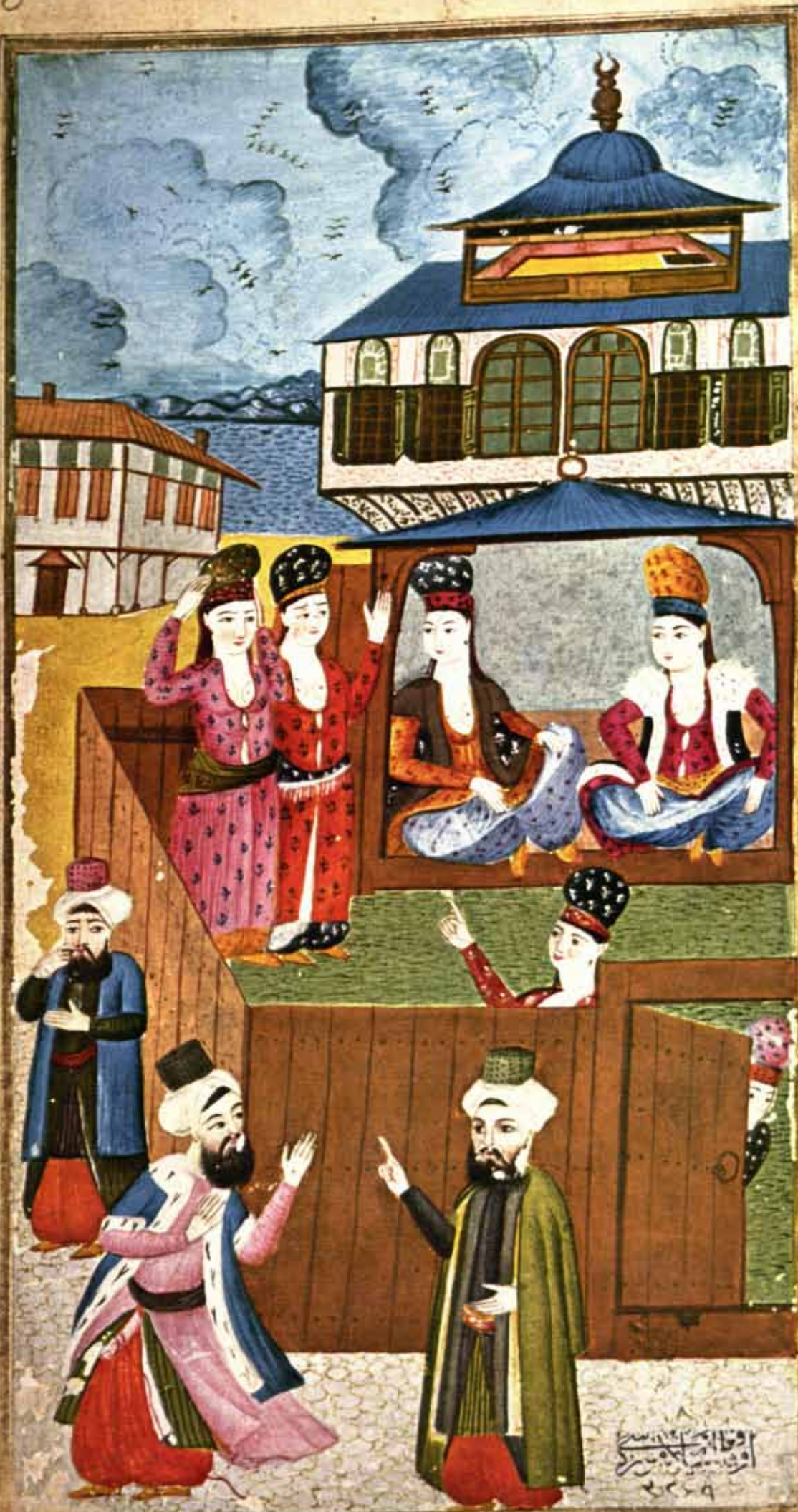












سلسله و برده چو این  
بکمال این کرم و شفقت  
کو سر زنده شادان  
دیسر منور عرض اولر که  
اک لازم ستم و شرارت  
خار و کل نر از این





بهود و بیدار و بیدار  
 ده بول چه او کانه  
 بخاک او کور بوی او  
 در بر او بوی او  
 ن کور کور او  
 زاده و شو او  
 به برای بختی  
 و شل بند و زاده  
 کور کور او  
 کار او بر عین  
 سحر سحر او  
 شعله کور او  
 به خدا باز  
 رتور در خاک  
 در کور او  
 به بول او

به مبتلا اولوب بجای سید صفادیکین

شدره

عاده سی طغش زمام  
 روی لعل لعل فرخ  
 یلایر لعل لعل  
 باش کور او  
 ایر لعل لعل  
 بر بر او  
 فرشت کور او

این  
 است  
 به  
 به





مادر حکم عدم و بر حکم  
 غالب مرد که با او سر  
 ایده کاشد یکی مانی  
 بلکه ادعا این که زخم زنا  
 بر بره کلبه خنثی نام  
 اولوی جانی یحیی صوفی  
 شفت ایتر کا ملو  
 حاضر اولور به بنارده  
 خیرای می سکا ال غده  
 باشد که الله غم دیک  
 دهر بر بنایش شش کوشش  
 نجیر سر ویر اول سودا  
 یامه در ماه کله در کج

ت جاریه معسوقه

نه کم ز بهر سلی زان مان  
 نیل و شش عشق که با او سر  
 بانی تحفه سر قتلان  
 که مغنیه امیلیه عجز و جاب  
 بیدیکیم نفیض ابره ز ابرای  
 کرغان دایم که کجیه  
 بهلواند از او یوسف و داغ  
 او بنا دجان حکمده اند  
 شبر آمو بره نخج اولد  
 چون که کلکوند و در برید









a hair could not have passed between them. It was thus that in secret they spent the night, now savouring the sweetness of kisses, now abandoning themselves to all the pleasures of love."

The unfortunate Maubad soon realises that he is being deceived, and again and again he gives vent to his fury. Each time, however, Vis is able by feigning repentance to obtain forgiveness. Then one day the limits of the king's patience are at last reached: although Vis has been locked up in an inaccessible castle, behind gates sealed with the royal seal and under a military guard, she nevertheless manages with the help of her nurse to admit Râmîn to this inviolable retreat, and to enjoy in his company several months of delight:



"Then King Maubad approached the Lady Vis. He laid hold of her musk-perfumed curls, pulled her from her splendid seat, with its legs shaped like lions, and dragged her through the dust and ashes. Then he twisted her delicate hands and arms, and bound her hands behind her back, as the hands of thieves are bound; then he struck her with his whip on the buttocks and the back and the breast and the thighs—such blows that her whole body split open like a pomegranate and the blood dripped down like the seeds of the pomegranate. From Vis's fair white body the blood flowed as wine falls from the crystal glass; from her body, white as camphor, came forth cinnabar, as the ruby and pomegranate come forth from the dense mountain. Under the blows her body in many parts became blue as indigo. The blood poured forth as water pours from the sources of the Nile, and the red mingled with the blue so that her body resembled a field of saffron and tulips."

The nurse receives similar treatment, but the description of her punishment has less charm and need not be reproduced here. In a further burst of rage the king is on the point of cutting off his fair wife's head, but she just manages to evade this punishment by exerting all the resources of feminine eloquence. No sooner has she escaped, however, than she takes to flight with her lover. Then, some months later, she returns, still as beguiling and persuasive as ever.

Meanwhile, weary of a series of adventures more appropriate to a romance than to real life, Râmin finally listens to the advice of a friend and goes away, seeking to forget Vis. He travels to western Iran camping and hunting on the way, and there, one fine day, falls in with Princess Gol. She at once offers him the hospitality of her palace, and soon induces him to marry her. Râmin believes that he has found happiness at last, and conveys this to Vis with true masculine brutality; and the abandoned princess replies to his cruel letter in a long series of pathetic epistles.

But soon the inconstant Râmin tires of Gol and rides away alone in the depth of winter to return to Vis. At first—not unexpectedly—he receives a very cool reception, and this provides matter for many hundred lines. But at last love is victorious and—

"The two lovers passed a month with no rest from their pastimes either by night or day. The arrow was always directed straight towards the target. They were as closely bound together as sugar and wine, now taking up the golden cup full of wine, now embracing one another like two slender cypresses, now mingling the camphor and the rose, now applying sweet balm to their wound."

Having failed in his attempt to break free from Vis, Râmin now turns against his brother Maubad. Taking advantage of a new military campaign—for which he once again declares himself unfit by illness—he lays hands on the royal treasury and carries Vis off to the safety of some inaccessible mountains. Maubad sets out after them, but his pursuit is interrupted by death. And now at last Vis and Râmin can be united in marriage and reign happily over the empire of Iran.



The love story of Khusrau, son of the Sassanian emperor Hormuzd, and Shîrîn, niece of Queen Mehîn Bânu of Armenia, is no less full of incidents and vicissitudes than the story of Vîs and Râmîn.

Khusrau falls in love with Shîrîn before he has even seen her, on the strength of a report on her charms made to him by his favourite Shâpur, who had met her in the course of a journey to distant parts. Without a moment's hesitation the prince charges his favourite to bring to him the object of his passion. When he arrives at his destination Shâpur encounters Shîrîn frolicking lightheartedly with her attendants: whereupon he conceals himself and, being a gifted painter, rapidly sketches the features of his master on a paper which he hangs from a tree. No sooner does the princess see this portrait of a handsome young man than she falls in love with him. The wily Shâpur repeats the same manœuvre on the two following days, the better to ensure that the dart has gone home. Finally he shows himself and reveals his master's name to the impatient Shîrîn, who at once resolves to flee to Khusrau. A hunting party gives her an opportunity, and the speed of her horse Shabdiz soon takes her beyond the reach of any pursuers.

Meanwhile Khusrau, who has had to leave his father's court, has set out for Armenia in quest of Shîrîn. One day, having halted for the night, he wanders away from his servants, dreaming of the one he loves. He comes to a spring of cool water, and there his eye is caught by a naked beauty bathing herself and washing her flowing hair:

"When her hand poured water over her head it was as if the firmament were raining down stars on the moon. Her body was resplendent as a mountain covered with snow... As he looked on this fair crystal the prince's heart was all on fire, as if it were the sun... The fair one with the jasmine breast did not see his glances, for the hyacinths of her curls obscured the lily of her eyes. But when her moon-like face emerged from the musky cloud of her hair Shîrîn discovered the king. She perceived a phoenix mounted on a francolin (Khusrau's horse), a cypress raised over a white poplar. Standing there in the spring, ashamed for what his eyes had seen, she trembled like the moonlight on the water. Nothing was left to her, this fountain of sugar, but to veil herself in the long strands of her hair, black as night as it was..."

Then Khusrau, "seeing that the hind of the meadows was troubled by the sight of the hunting lion, spared his helpless victim, lion that he was; and, using the patience which wisdom inspires in the reasonable mind, bowed to the rules of courtesy and good manners, and turned his glance away."

The two lovers pass on, therefore, without recognising one another, and a long time is to go by before they come together again:

"How often the loved one presents herself drunk at the gate while her lover has his head buried in the pillows and can think of nothing but sleep! How often happiness passes by, and we pay no attention!"



Khusrau, having become king on his father's death, has to go to the wars; and Shirin, who has returned to her aunt's court thinking to find her lover there, possesses her soul in patience until at last the longed-for visitor arrives with his retinue. Then life is one long round of rejoicings, banquets, hunting parties, games of polo, music and singing. The two lovers would be in the extreme of bliss were it not that the cautious Queen Mehîr Bânû has made her niece swear that she will grant nothing of importance in advance of marriage. Shirin struggles against her instincts and keeps her promise, allowing her lover to take no more than a few kisses:

"This proud idol, maidenly and modest as she was,  
Who would not even have permitted Simorgh to settle on her shoulder,  
In a moment of abandonment under the influence of wine  
Became the king's accomplice in exchanging kisses of love."

They were kisses of such devouring violence that she had later to conceal the traces under the paint on her face; and yet they were insufficient to satisfy Khusrau, whose thoughts seemed to be far away from any idea of marriage.

Exasperated by this resistance, and being obliged also to go to war against a usurper, Khusrau raises the siege and disappears again, leaving Shirin to languish in the gloomy castle which he has built for her in one of the most desolate parts of his kingdom and in which she is to await his return—Shirin's Castle (*Qasr-i-Shirin*), the ruins of which can still be seen near Kermanshah.

Having vanquished his enemy with the help of his ally the Emperor of Byzantium, Khusrau marries the Emperor's daughter Maria, and finds himself bound to promise that he will take no other wife so long as she shall live. The unfortunate Shirin, pining in her grim prison, finds consolation in the pure passion she has inspired in the sculptor Farhâd, who has undertaken to hew through a distant mountain a channel in which will flow the milk of herds browsing in remote and inaccessible pastures. The king, as jealous as he is faithless, takes offence at this innocent friendship and brings about his rival's death by conveying to him a false account of Shirin's end.

Maria now dies in her turn; but instead of now marrying Shirin, the inconstant Khusrau goes off to Ispahan and takes a new wife, Shekâr. Then finally, finding himself by chance near the princess's castle in the course of a hunting expedition, he asks to see her. Shirin agrees to speak to him only from the terrace of her castle; then after his departure she regrets her harshness and, disguised as a page, joins the throng of courtiers who are being entertained in the king's tent by the singing of minstrels. She then reveals her identity, but has sufficient strength of mind to repulse her lover when he seeks to embrace her. Finally she obtains from him an oath that he will ask for nothing before marriage. At last the great day arrives, and with it the final requirement which Shirin lays on her bridegroom: he is on no











account to approach her on the wedding night in a state of intoxication. Khusrau, of course, at once forgets his promise and drinks more than is good for him; and the young bride takes her revenge by arranging that her place in the marriage bed shall be taken by a hideous old woman. So hideous is she that even in his drunken state the king is not deceived. Whereupon Shîrîn, who has been watching from behind a curtain, pardons him tenderly, and then—

“When he awoke at dawn in accordance with his habit, his eyes fell on a bunch of roses without a thorn... The bitter wine was favourable to him, Shîrîn’s sweet kisses having swept away his drunkenness... Then he sounded the call of love and put the young fruit to plunder. Now he devoured the apples and the jasmine, now he toyed with the pomegranates and the lilies. Anon the white falcon flew from the king’s hand, and he suffered the pheasant from the garden to strut on his breast; anon the dove evaded the goshawk’s claws with a swift beat of her wings. The young she-goat strove with the lion, but the male lion at last had his will of her, showing such valour that before the guardian of the treasure was aware of the danger he had already broken the agate seal with his ruby. The juice of the rose was poured into the silver cup, mingling its sugar with the kernel of the almond. The shell offered a cradle to the branch of coral; water and fire were brought together in union, and from this mingling of water and fire the chamber where they passed the night was filled with cinnabar and mercury. For whole nights and days they forgot to sleep, piercing the pearls with the ruby. On other nights and other days they abandoned themselves to the deep sleep of fatigue, with armfuls of violets on their breasts and of lilies in their arms.”

Thereafter the couple lived in perfect bliss until Khusrau was assassinated by a son whom he had fathered on Maria; and Shîrîn at once followed him to the grave, piercing herself with a dagger over his body.

\* \* \*

The ardent Vis and the chaste Shîrîn—one a victim of the fatality which inflames her soul and her senses for Râmîn, the other of her attachment to principles which prevent her from yielding herself to the man she loves outside marriage—take an honourable place among the *grandes amoureuses* of literature. They also show the important place accorded to women—idealised in the excess of passion no less than in the excess of virtue—in Iranian romances before the arrival of Islam.

With the exception of the touching figure of Farhâd, the male characters show up less well. Râmîn, discouraged by the recurring difficulties which thwart his encounters with his mistress, has no hesitation in abandoning her and seeking his pleasures elsewhere. Khusrau, the selfish *grand seigneur*, is more heartless still—taking two other wives, from policy rather than love, before at last marrying the woman who has waited for him. Spoiled by the amusements of the court, and feeling themselves free from any moral obligation to those whom they have seduced, they are both more concerned with the easy pleas-



ures of love than with any ideas of moral restraint, which seem to be regarded as solely the woman's concern. We find the fullest incarnation of this male selfishness in Bahrâm Gûr, who is represented in the *Haft Paikar* taking his pleasure with the seven princesses whom he married at the same time, having fallen in love with all of them simultaneously at sight of the portraits with which a skilful painter had decorated one of his palaces in the desert.

The practice of love in ancient Iran thus seems to fall far short of the spiritual heights to which it later attained. And it is surely significant that the two romances which celebrate with most enthusiasm the idea of absolute passion, free of all fleshly taint, take their subject matter not from the Persian tradition but from the Semitic world, the world of Islam. These are *Lailâ and Majnûn* and *Yûsuf and Zulaikhâ*, themes immortalised by a whole succession of poets.

*Lailâ and Majnûn* deals with the Arab legend of the poet Qeis, better known under the name of Majnûn, the madman (the man mad for love). Majnûn has loved since childhood Lailâ, the daughter of the chief of a tribe at enmity with his own, and when she is given in marriage to a rival he retires to the desert, where he lives with the wild beasts, singing the praises of the eyes of the gazelles, which remind him of the eyes of his beloved. After a great variety of episodes demonstrating the abnegation and the fidelity of the lover, Lailâ, who has remained a virgin in spite of her marriage, loses her husband. Thereupon Majnûn returns to his beloved. They remain in a chaste embrace for the whole of a day and a night; then Lailâ dies, and Majnûn follows her almost at once. Their love was not of this world.

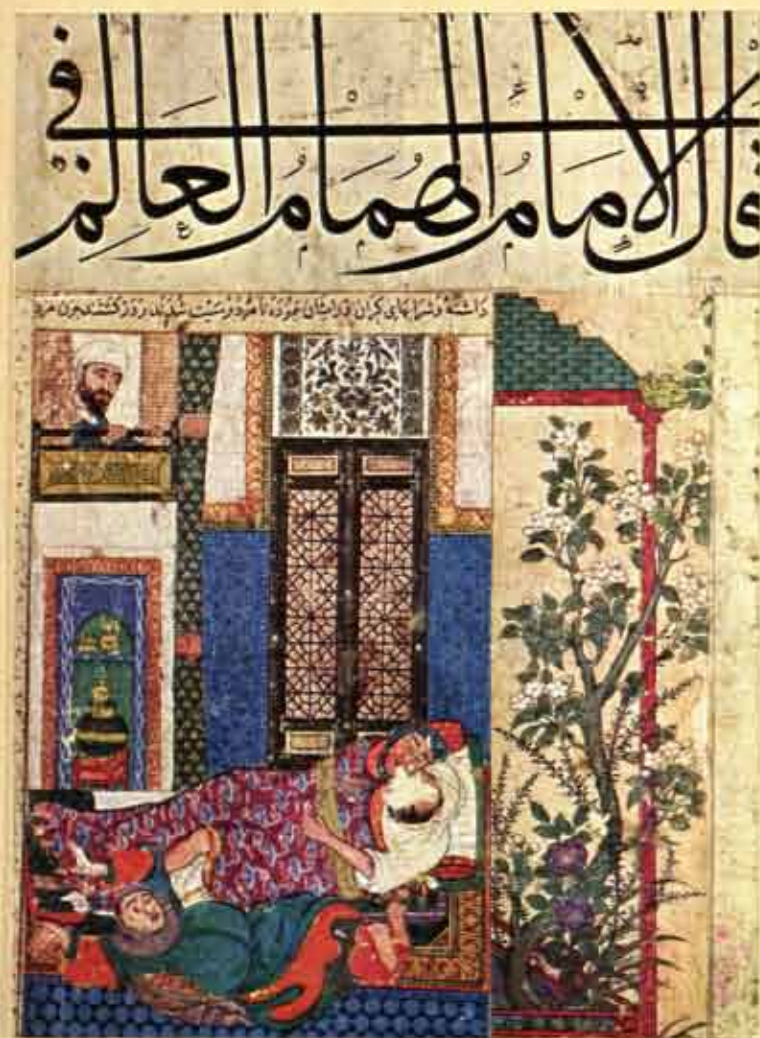
The subject was treated by many poets writing in the Persian and Turkish languages. Like our Western story of Tristram and Iseult—and perhaps all the more effectively because it does not rely on any form of magical intervention—it expresses a theme which is as old as humanity, the theme of the love that cannot be realised. It is a theme which appealed to the Moslem Orient all the more strongly because of the insurmountable barriers which their manners and customs raised between two lovers seeking to be united. It takes all the irreverence of a great poet like Sa'dî to tell us the tale of how an Arab prince, anxious to become acquainted with the object of Majnûn's passion, had Lailâ pointed out to him one day. To his great disappointment he found himself confronted with a swarthy little Bedouin woman with no claim to any kind of beauty. "Lailâ must be looked at with the eyes of Majnûn", concludes the poet.

The story of *Yûsuf and Zulaikhâ*, another favourite theme of Persian writers, is the old story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It follows the broad lines of the Biblical story as it was transposed in the Koran, but introduces quite a different spirit. In the Iranian version Joseph, the very pattern of a *shâhed* (see below), is the incarnation of supreme beauty and perfection. Zulaikhâ, after seeking in vain to









possess him carnally, gradually attains the sublimity of Platonic love, and through this achieves holiness. Her passion, at first wholly of the earth, at last finds its fulfilment in the world of the spirit.

..

The subject matter of the courtly romances which have just been discussed—and there are many more which would equally repay examination—illustrates the contrast between the two cycles, the ancient cycle and the Islamic cycle, and suggests both the features which are common to the two great periods of the amorous history of Iran and the features which distinguish the one from the other.

In both periods we find the same cult of beauty and of passion. In the pre-Islamic period, however, the quest for beauty did not go beyond the graces of the body, and passion, which found its ideal manifestations

# فان الامام عصام العالم في













only in the fidelity and devotion of the woman, was directed solely towards the possession of the loved one. The Moslem ethic and the mystical conventions with which it was soon overlaid led to the refinement of the lover's object. The beauty which inspired love, though expressed in beings of flesh and blood, was now the beauty of divinity; and love itself passed beyond the impulses of the flesh and the heart to become a spiritual discipline and one of the paths which led to mystical union.

\* \* \*

This change in modes of feeling was no doubt the product of several centuries of metaphysical speculation; but it would not have been possible without the transformation in manners and morals which followed the establishment of the new religion. As we have seen, women enjoyed a considerable degree of independence in ancient Iran. Islam progressively changed this state of affairs. The Moslem authors who collected and adapted Sassanian works, as they recount the adventures of their heroines, cannot help betraying the mistrust they feel for the whole female sex:

"Once a man has imposed on a woman the desire of his heart, it is as if he has put a halter on her neck."

And he cannot be sur that he will be the only man she loves:

"For women have a vulnerable heart and a simple mind, taking on varying characters according as they are led. They are ever inclined to believe what men tell them, and for a few fair words are ready to yield their body: however intelligent and prudent a woman may be, yet at the end of the day she will surrender herself to the man with a ready tongue. Such are the words that bring her to her ruin: 'Fair as the sun and bright as the moon! It is love for thee that lays me low and reduces me to distress; suffering and sighing for thee, I am brought to the point of death. Grieving by day, I appeal for help by night, wandering like a madman over the desert. If thou dost not take pity on me I shall die. Suppliant as I am, I cling to thy robe. Do not, by thy harshness, tear my soul from my body: I am a human creature like thyself!...' Whether she be queen or empress, however abstinent she be or resolute to avoid sin, on hearing tender words such as these she will yield herself with no thought that in doing so she incurs dishonour."

And this indeed was what happened to *Vis*, the heroine of the romance from which these quotations are taken. She herself confesses:

"In women desire is stronger than modesty and wisdom. Among created beings woman is imperfect, and in consequence capricious and of ill repute, hazarding this world and the next for the sake of a moment's desire, losing all reason when her desire is fulfilled... Many wiles are within a woman's skill, but she is ever disposed to accept fair words from a man. Man instinctively sets a thousand traps through which his desire will be fulfilled: always, woman is the game he hunts, and it costs him small pains to run her down... Then the wretched woman is contemptible in the eyes of the man who has seduced her, and who now turns away from her."

In the fourteenth century the didactic poet Awhadî paints an even darker picture of the female character:



"Do not put a reed in the hand of a bad wife: it would be better to cut her hand off. God judged the spinning wheel appropriate for the woman: tell her, therefore, to leave pen and paper to the man... If a woman who cannot read uses hard words against thee, how much worse will it be when she has learned to read? Keep her wrangling, therefore, away from the pen: if thou canst use it, what need has she of it?... If thy wife goes out too much, beat her without pity. If she likes to show herself, rend her garments. If she has disobeyed thee, put her to death. If she has dishonoured herself, bury her.

"...If thou be in love with her, say nothing to her of it, for then thou shouldst never be free of her deceit. The baser part of her will always find means to its end: if thou close the back door she will find a way through the front. Woman is a serpent which casts its venom: strike firmly for her head and she will injure thee no more... She is not to be guided by good arguments; she cannot be brought to confess her fault; no oath will make her honest; no contract will make her thy friend. She will embrace thee when thou art there, but forget thee as soon as thou art gone.

"...Woman is worth nothing—even were she the best of women—for she is like to the tortuous serpent."

Conceptions of this kind soon lead to the disappearance of women from public life and even—with exceptions for women like Shîrîn, Lailâ and Zulaikhâ—from a literature which has less and less to say about the virtues of their sex.

Apart from the classical heroines of romance, the history and legends of Islamic Iran make no mention of any *grandes amoureuses*, and the lyric poets know nothing of the idealised heroines of Western romantic poetry.

There is, therefore, particular interest in the few lines which have been miraculously preserved from the work of a woman poet of the tenth or eleventh century, Râbi a Bint-é-Kaab Ghostari, written with an intensity of feminine sensibility which was not to be found again in Persian literature until modern times:

"The evil I wish thee is that, by God's will, thou shouldst fall in love  
With a heart of stone, insensible as thine own,  
So that thou mayst feel the torment of love, the burning pain of passion, the pangs  
of grief,  
So that separation may throw thee into an anguish of suffering,  
So that thou mayst realise what I mean to thee."

And to the bird singing its plaint in the night she says:

"I am alone, and must lament the burden that I bear.  
But thou needst not lament: thou art not alone in bearing thine.  
I utter not a word though I weep tears of blood:  
Then why dost thou complain—*thy* eyes are clear?"

\* \* \*









To illustrate the psychology of love in Iran is a complex task, by reason of the abundance of the subject matter and the great range of themes on which it touches—not only of human, sociological and historical interest but also of aesthetic, literary and spiritual concern. Thus within the restricted framework of this book it has seemed preferable to build up the picture by a series of separate studies rather than to follow a rigorously logical sequence.

The preceding pages have drawn a picture of love and passion in ancient Iran as we find it depicted in a school of courtly poetry which forms a link between two different periods of civilisation. We now turn to an eleventh century writer for an account of sentimental and erotic relationships as they were conceived

in the ordinary life of his period and social class. This will be followed by chapters—indispensable for our study—on the philosophico-religious and aesthetic canons which lyric poetry imposed on the Persian soul over a period of many centuries. (It must be noted, however, that from time to time there were reactions of extreme violence against these restrictive conventions). And finally we shall conclude with a series of illustrations of Persian manners, the most vivid of which come from accounts by Western travellers of the seventeenth century.















## LOVE IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

The scion of an ancient reigning family of the mountains of the Caspian, and thus born into a class which had jealously preserved the traditions of older days long after the advent of Islam, but at the same time a man of his own period, the Emir Kai-Kâ'ûs ibn Iskandar composed towards the middle of the eleventh century a *Book of Counsel* (known under the title of the *Qâbûs-nâma*) dedicated to his son Ghilân-shâh and designed to teach him the art of governing his states and governing himself. It deals with every conceivable subject of any importance; and so we find, sandwiched between a chapter on the game of chess and another on the rules to be observed in the baths, a dissertation on what the author regards as the important and dangerous art of love.

Already feeling the sobering effects of age, the Emir sets out a series of recommendations which we feel he would never have thought of following in his own younger days. The work illustrates with great charm and sensibility the attitude to love of a man of sense and education brought up in the classical traditions of Iran, which scarcely changed until the invasion of the country by European ideas. The ideas expressed by some of the poets whom we shall meet later are inspired—less pragmatically, perhaps—by the same philosophy.

The Emir Kai-Kâ'ûs writes:

*"Chapter XIV: Of Love and the Manner of Practising It"*

"Seek, my son, never to fall in love, either in youth or in age. If it should happen to thee, mistrust thy heart, and beware of giving it up without respite to the pleasures of love. To pursue the ends of passion is not the act of a wise man. Abstain from love if thou canst, for it holds great peril, particularly for men advanced in years or without possessions. A year of happiness is not enough to compensate for the pain of a day's separation. Love is merely grief and torment and trouble, even though the pain it causes be an agreeable one. When thou art far from the loved one thou



art consumed with misery; when thou art united with the loved one and she is of unreasonable disposition, thou wilt be deprived by caprice and ill humour of the joys of possession. And if thy beloved is exposed to the seductive practices of some man of her acquaintance thou wilt never be free from the importunity of others; for to demonstrate their sympathy for thee they will continually cast blame on her—such is people's wont.

"Thus watch over thyself and avoid falling in love; for this is a thing the wise man can achieve.

"It is impossible to love at first sight. First the eyes see; after that the heart approves; then inclination is born; and finally we desire to see the loved one again. Keep thy desires under the rule of thy heart. If thou shouldst let thy heart follow thy desires thou wilt seek a second meeting; thy liking will double in strength; love will then have increased its hold, and thou wilt desire a third encounter. Then it will take only a few words of conversation, a few exchanges of question and answer, and, as the proverb has it, 'the ass is away with the tether, the halter is thrown to the winds'.

"Thereafter if thou seekest to restrain thyself thou canst not do it, having been won over in this fashion. Each day will increase thy tender torment, and thou wilt be bound to let thy heart have its will. But if thou hast abstained from the beginning, if thy will puts a brake on thy desire, if thou take care not to repeat the loved one's name, if thou occupy thyself with other matters, if thou satisfy thy concupiscence elsewhere, if thou turn thy eyes away from the object of thy love, then it is the affair of a week. Thou wilt think no more of thy love and wilt soon be delivered. But this is not given to every man...

"If thou give thyself up to love in thy youth, then indeed thou mayst be pardoned. Those who observe thee will be filled with indulgence, saying to themselves, 'He is young!' But take care not to fall in love when old age has come upon thee, for the old may not be excused. But even then, wert thou a man of lowly estate it would be of little concern. As a king and a man of advanced years thou must beware of manifesting love towards anyone: there can be no more ungrateful condition for an aged king."

There follows an anecdote showing that old age may begin in very advanced years: "at seventy years or more" the grandfather of the author freed a young slave boy whom he had allowed himself to regard with too much fondness, enjoining him not to reappear until his beard had grown.

"... And now, my son, I know that it is useless for me to speak: if thou shouldst encounter love thou wilt pay no heed to my advice. Old as I am myself, I like to repeat these lines:

'Each human being to whom is granted life and speech  
Ought, like Adhra and Wâmiq, to be in love.  
He who does not profess such doctrine is a mere hypocrite:  
Not to be in love is not to be a man.' "

And the author continues to lavish his advice, in which we can sense something of the atmosphere of those gatherings—all male, but nevertheless much concerned with amorous dalliance—which constituted the social life of the Orient until quite recent times:





"But though I have expressed myself in this fashion thou must not follow the line of conduct expressed in my little verse. Try not to fall in love; but if thou dost, let it be with a worthy object. Take care that it should not be the mistress of Ptolemy or Plato. The beloved must possess a sufficient degree of beauty, though I conceive that he may not be as fair as Joseph<sup>1</sup> son of Jacob. Let him also be graceful, that loose tongues may be silenced and men may be disposed to find excuse for thee; for the world is all too ready to find fault... And if thou art invited into company do not have thy friend go with thee. If, however, thou dost take him with thee, do not lavish attentions on him in the presence of strangers; and remember, above all things, that others will not see him with thy eyes. As the poet has said:

'Woe to thee if thou appear in the sight of all  
As thou appearest in mine.'

"Thus though he may seem to thee the fairest of all it may well be that to others he is beyond compare the ugliest. And remember well, when in company, not to be for ever offering him a fruit, ogling him, or calling him over to whisper sweet nothings in his ear."

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<sup>1</sup> The Yûsuf of *Yûsuf and Zulaikhâ*, the pattern of masculine beauty.



After these moral and practical considerations the wise Emir explains to his heir how best to take the pleasures of love and—thinking more of the caution proper to his own white hair than of the quest of amorous delight—repeats some of the precepts of the medicine of his period:

*"Chapter XV: Of the Pleasures of Love*

"Know, O my son, that if thou lovest someone thou shouldst not constantly be toying with the loved one, whether drunk or fasting; for when thy seed issues from thee it is most surely the germ of a soul or a living being which is intended to fructify.

"If thou make love, let it not be in a state of drunkenness, for that is still more harmful. It is better, and more salutary, to make love when the effects of the wine are beginning to wear off. Abstain during high winds. (He who does not know the right moment for any particular form of activity is no better than an animal; for man, if he would distinguish himself from the beasts, must find the right time for everything).

"And now concerning women and boys, do thou not attach thyself to only one sex. In this way thou mayst enjoy the pleasures which each one has to offer, and wilt avoid incurring the hostility of that which is neglected.

"I have told thee that to make love to excess is bad for the health; but to abstain completely is no less injurious. Thus do thou make love only when desire comes upon thee, and never as a matter of obligation: in this way it is less harmful.

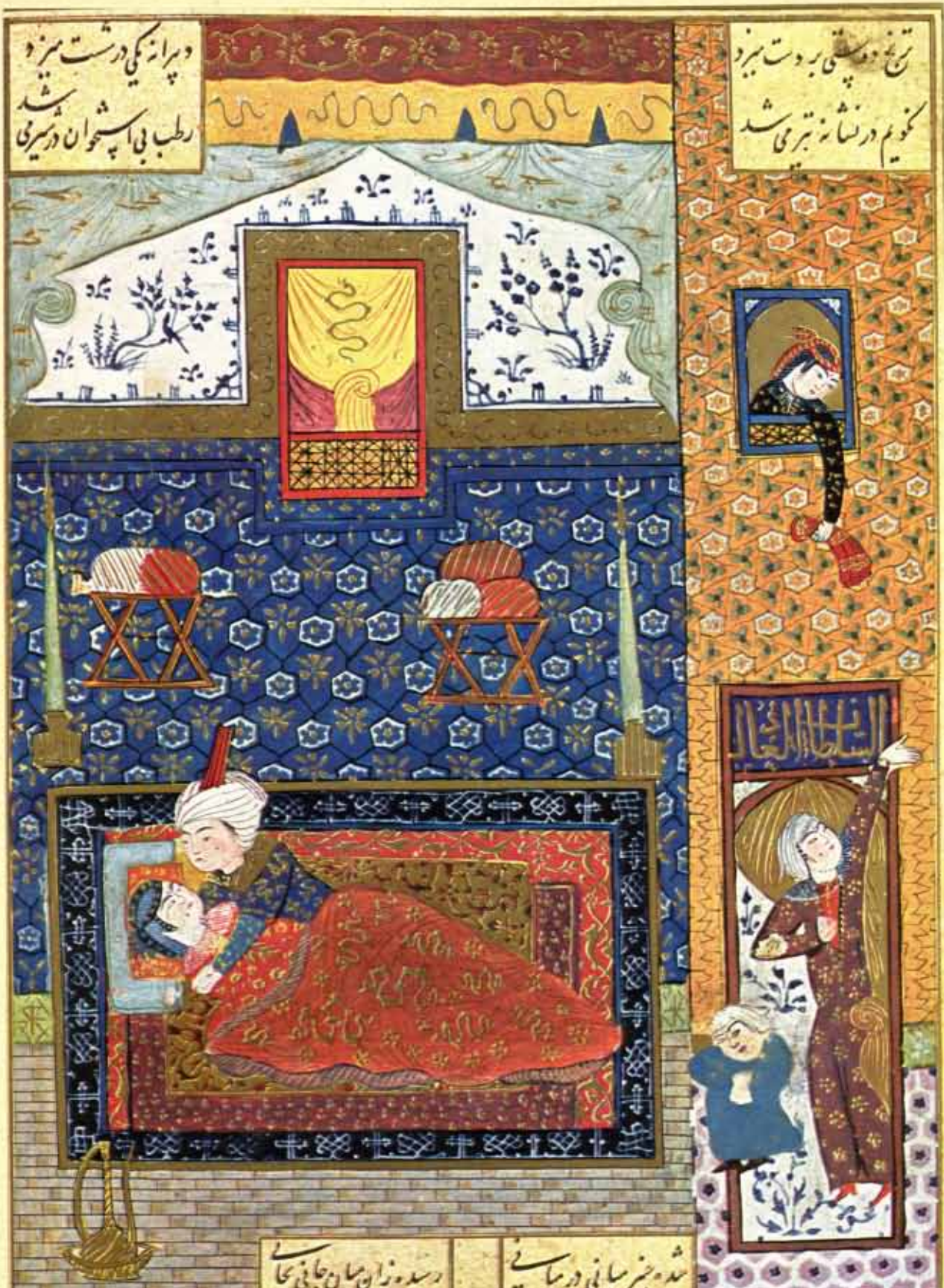
"But whether desire comes upon thee or not, abstain during the great heats and the great colds; for it is in these two seasons that love is most dangerous, particularly for those of advanced years. Of all the seasons of the year, the most suitable is spring, the air then being temperate, the springs more abundant in water, and nature in all its glory and vigour. When the universe is in this condition the influence which it exerts on us—who are so many microcosms—renders us like unto it. The various humours of our body are in balance, the blood flows more abundantly in our veins and the sperm in our loins; in spite of himself man feels the urge to make love and to take his pleasure in it; and the natural desire being spontaneous, there is then less danger. The same thing is true of the letting of blood. Thus, so far as possible, abstain from having thy blood let during the great heats and the great colds, even if thou feel the need for it. Care for thyself with appropriate beverages and food-stuffs, avoiding all that might be harmful to thee.

"In summer devote thyself to boys, and in winter to women."



ترنج و پیستی بر دست میزد  
گویم در نشانه تبری شد

و پیرانه کی درشت میزد  
رطب بی اسپشوان در سیری



چکده آب گل در سیکون جام  
ز رنگ آمیزی آن آتش د  
شازدونی در خند پوشش  
زنوشن خواب چون سر بر کرد  
ز دست فاصکان پر دشت

شده خرمیانی در میان  
سکر بکده آخه در منبر یاد  
شبان کشته پر سگرف و سیا  
بنده در بر و سیرین آغوش  
خدا را آفرین از سر کرد  
نشد رنگ عودسی تا یک ماه

رسیده زان میان جانی بجای  
صدف بر شاخ مرغان ممدی  
شازدونی ترک خواب  
بیک جاسر و چون طاد خشت  
آب اذام را تا دیب کردند  
عمیلا و سخن ترک و مایون

بیک جا آب آتش عمدی  
بهر و ارید با مایوت سخته  
که الهی خوشی و طاد خشت  
نیایش خانه را ترتیب کردند  
ز خدا دستار اگر در گلگون



## THE PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE

Between the very practical *ars amandi* outlined in the *Qâbûs-nâma* and the later discussion of the various forms of love practised in Iran it is necessary to examine the philosophical and aesthetic conceptions which, to the Persian mind, underlie the passions of the heart—reaching out beyond the pursuit of physical pleasure in all its ingenious variations.

From the older civilisation which was so strongly imbued with the doctrine of Mazdaism, and at certain periods marked also by strong Hellenic influences, Iran of the Islamic period inherited the conception that the act of love transcends matter and achieves a metaphysical significance. For those who followed the teachings of Zoroaster the act, if consummated with due holiness, made its contribution to the equilibrium of the world and to the discomfiture of Ahriman.

Like the adepts of Platonism, the thinkers and poets who were to influence the sensibility of Moslem Persia saw in the pursuit of love a means of elevating the human soul by sublimating fleshly desire into a desire for union with God.

Preoccupations of this kind are almost invariably to be discerned in the corpus of erotic poetry written in a language which so often coincides with that of mystical poetry. And no doubt they also left their mark on the personal behaviour of individuals, at least in the cultivated classes—providing on occasion an excuse for taking liberties with the rules of accepted morality.

\* \* \*

An interesting passage in a work attributed to Omar Khayyam (d. 1132) provides a link between ancient and Islamic Iran and gives the essence of the whole erotic philosophy which for centuries conditioned the literature, the art, the modes of feeling and the sensual pleasures of Iran. This work is the *Naurûz-nâma* ("Book of the New Day"), a treatise devoted to the celebration of *Naurûz*, the first



برود یو شهوت زبردست  
به در بند در تاخت بهر شک

ملک چون ز جام لبش چست  
شه روم بر باد پاشد سوار

بیوی ریاچین و برک سمن  
به پرواز شد تا بطف همین



عقار از دردم "شه برید" "تو حرام را در کش





day of the Persian year (21st March), which was marked by rites designed to ensure the annual renewal of the world.

On this occasion, our author tells us, the Zoroastrian high priest presented certain gifts to the King of Kings—a gold cup filled with wine, a ring, a silver coin, a gold coin, a sheaf of green corn, a sabre, a bow and arrows, an inkstand and calamus, a horse, a falcon, and a young male slave who should be fair of face.

A chapter is then devoted to each of these gifts and to the symbolism associated with them. From the "Discourse on the characteristics of a fair face", which is concerned with the handsome slave boy, we take the following passages:

"The sages invariably regard a fair face as a sign of good fortune, and its contemplation as a special privilege. They say that the appearance of a fair face has the same influence on human affairs as a lucky star in the ascendant. By way of comparison they cite the garment which has been laid away in a perfumed chest and, being impregnated with sweet odours, diffuses incense all around; or the ray of sunshine on the water, reflected in a sunless place. For it is so that fairness of face results from the influence of lucky stars which, by the will of the All-High, are associated with the destiny of men... The world contains many fair things to delight the eye, but none surpassing a fair face, for a fair face brings good fortune.



















"It puts the day under a good omen, it adds lustre to life, it inspires generosity and courage, it brings wealth and honours, for its presence arouses the admiration of all beholders; and this is a form of admiration which men seek to earn by increase of effort. Seeing it, the old man feels himself young again."

A handsome face is "the arena of love, the forum of happiness, the orchard of tenderness, the ornament of creation, the image of paradise."

The discussion which follows explains that the "fair face" is for the philosophers the sign of the perfection of created things; for the "naturalists" the token of the equilibrium of creation; for believers in metempsychosis the reward for a well-spent earlier life; for the Initiate the "reflection which illuminates the torch"; for others the "rain of mercy which waters the orchard of perception and causes the tree of desire to flourish"; for yet others "the manifestation of truth, which lays bare this same truth to the eyes of those who seek it in order to bring them back to the True (that is, to the Divinity) by virtue of its reality."

Finally come two anecdotes illustrating the power of a beautiful face, whether of man or woman. The second is about a handsome youth to whom it was said that Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1030) owed all his good fortune and all his glory, because he had contemplated him every morning during the greater part of his reign.

The *Naurûz-nâma* ends with the brief chapter: "And so this book, for a good omen, comes to an end on the subject of fair faces. Blessed be the writer and the reader."

The subject of this discussion, based on the ancient sources, is in fact what later developed into the theory of the *shâhed*, the "witness", a central character in Persian poetry, erotic as well as mystical. The *shâhed*—a handsome adolescent, either a girl or, more commonly, a youth, equipped with every grace of mind and body—reflects the splendour and perfection of the divine, on the basis of conceptions which are heavily charged with pantheistic ideas. No doubt the ardours which he inspires cover the whole gamut of desire, from the crudest to the most sublime; but the relationship with the *shâhed* exalts the soul and prepares it, distracted though it may be by the flesh, for the pursuit of perfect union in an impulse of desire which transcends the limits of this world.

"When I contemplate thy cheek, formed in the image of the moon, O my idol, it is in truth the effect of divine grace that I contemplate." (Sa'dî).

The Andalusian philosopher Ibn 'Arabî, who had considerable influence on Persian thought, declares somewhere that God "is he who manifests himself to the eyes of any lover in the loved one..."





For just as no other than God is adored, since it is impossible to adore any created being without seeing in him divinity itself... so it is also with love: no being can in truth love anyone other than its creator."

Consider, too the words of Maghribî (d. 1406-7):

"Under all beauty I see only Him; therefore do not suppose  
That my concern is with a handsome face.  
Such thoughts are far from me: in everything I see Him.  
*Thou* mayst see the sun: I see the whole Face.  
Wherever my glance turns, it sees no other than Him.  
All that I see of Him, I see only by His means."

Before him, 'Attâr (d. 1220) had written:

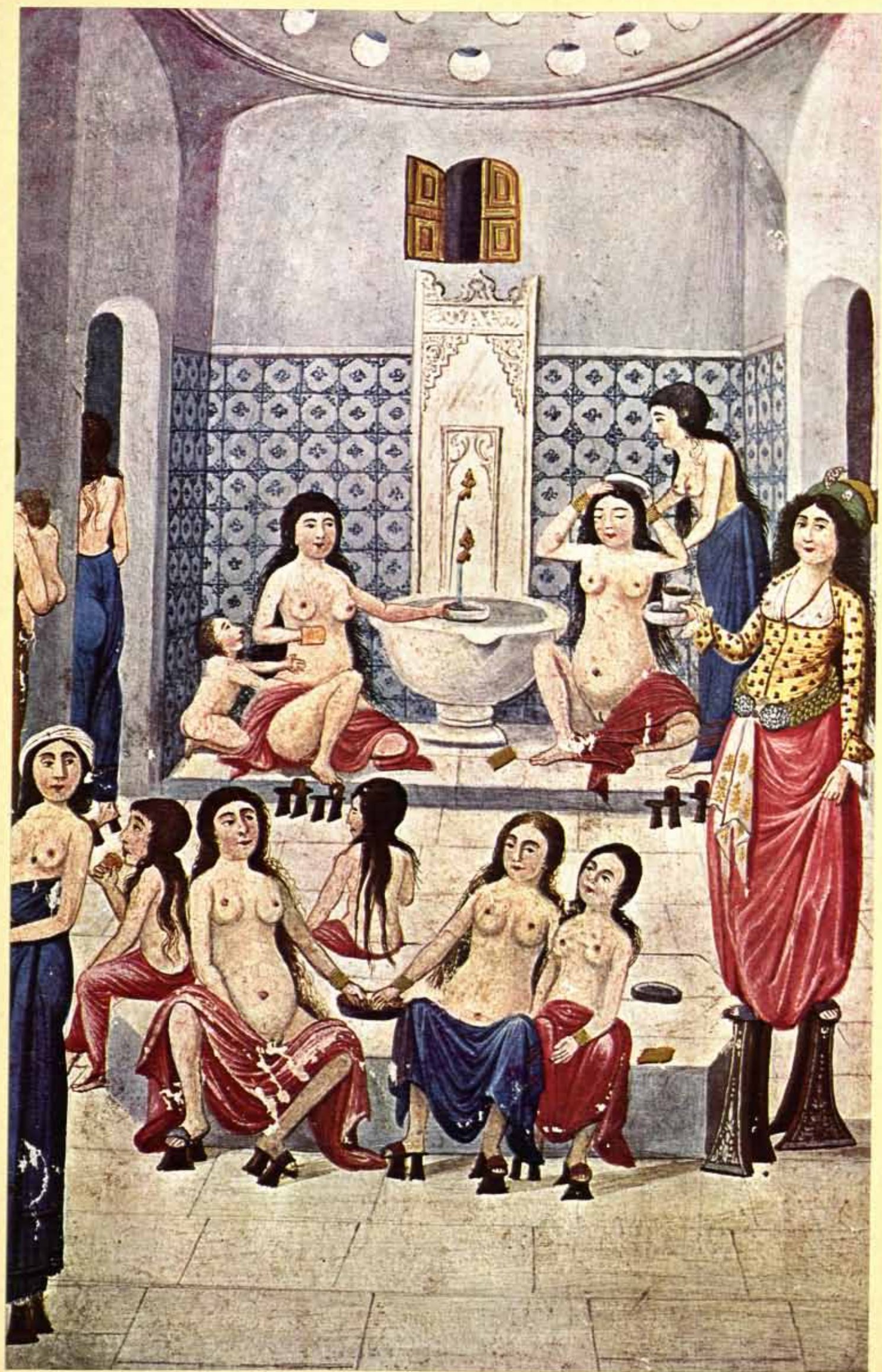
"The light of the believer is the brightness of His face,  
The darkness of the infidel the gleam of His hair.  
The atoms dancing in this world and the other  
Are a ray of sun from His face.  
In these two worlds do thou contemplate the images  
Of the two arches of His brows.  
The whole great tumult of the Resurrection  
Is born of the enchantment of a flutter of His eyelids."

The Persian poets performed an endless range of variations on these Platonic themes; and in reading their works we realise all the complexity of the feelings inspired by the *shâhed*. It is like a rainbow which climbs in a confused pattern of colour from a soil clogged with sensuality, soars into the firmament, and then, it may be, falls back to earth.

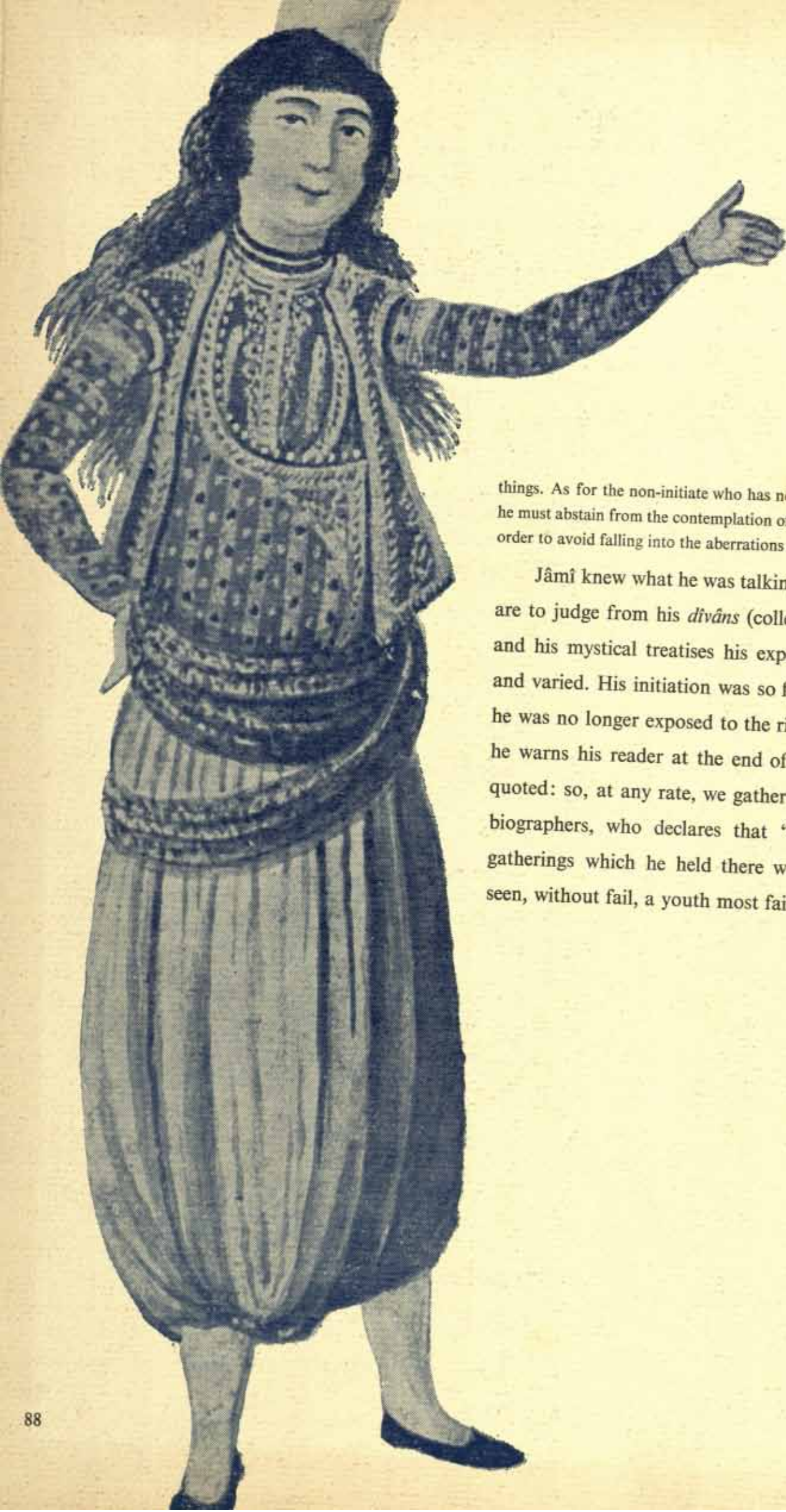
Jâmi (1414-1492), both a worldly and fashionable poet and a high dignitary in the spiritual brotherhood of the *Naqshbandî*, summarises the theory of the *shâhed* in more learned terms:

"For those who believe in and have experienced the (divine) Unity, the perfect being is he whose physical eye recognises the beauty of God (may He be glorified!) through the appearances of the palpable world, in the same fashion as his immaterial eye contemplates the spiritual appearances of the perfect splendour of divinity. In this there are two considerations. One is absolute: this Truth is the essential beauty, for it exists in itself and the Initiate can contemplate it by annihilating himself in God (may He be glorified!). The other is relative, resulting from the infusion of divinity in palpable or spiritual appearances: if the Initiate perceives Beauty he sees it as such and recognises in it the beauty of God, infused throughout created









things. As for the non-initiate who has not this understanding, he must abstain from the contemplation of handsome youths, in order to avoid falling into the aberrations of fleshly passion."

Jâmî knew what he was talking about, for if we are to judge from his *divâns* (collections of poems) and his mystical treatises his experience was wide and varied. His initiation was so far advanced that he was no longer exposed to the risk against which he warns his reader at the end of the passage just quoted: so, at any rate, we gather from one of his biographers, who declares that "at the spiritual gatherings which he held there was always to be seen, without fail, a youth most fair of face."







## THE AESTHETICS OF LOVE

This discussion of the *shâhed* and his function has already given us some indication of the aesthetics of love in Iranian literature and art. Its most striking features are its equivocal nature and its high degree of abstraction. The object of passion is a beautiful creature who at the same time is seen as a reflection of divine perfection. Is the beloved a girl or a youth? In the lyric poets it is usually difficult to be sure. Moreover, since Persian grammar makes no distinction between the masculine and the feminine genders, only the context can tell us—and then only in the rarest cases—the sex of the loved one whom the poet is celebrating in his verse. We must note also that in the courtly romances written in the mystical style the loved one who is vainly sought by the lover (Lailâ in *Lailâ and Majnûn*, Yûsuf in *Yûsuf and Zulaikhâ*) escapes from the world of flesh to become a pure symbol of the object of the metaphysical quest.

With occasional exceptions, love poems are addressed to unnamed loved ones, round whose physical presence there almost invariably flickers a suggestion of the universal Beloved One. Consequently we find nothing in the nature of an individualised description, none of those portraits which are so common in Western literature. The charms that have seduced the poet are depicted only in the most general terms, with the aid of a vast range of stock epithets, which in the hands of a practised artist like Hâfiz can produce most striking and varied effects.

Thus the poet falls in love with an "idol" which conceals a "heart of stone" (or "of steel") in a "breast of silver", with a "prince" or a "king of beauty", with a "moon", with a "moon-like face of the race of houris". The object of his passion is a "face resembling Chinese brocade", the "face of a peri" with "eyebrows in the form of a bow" which pierce the heart with the "arrow of a glance" shot by "drunken eyes", the lashes of which are themselves so many arrows. The "wild things of the heart" are





caught in the nets of the "hair in disorder". The eyes are formed of "lilies". The cheeks, "fair roses newly blossomed", are protected by the "young black (or Hindu) slave", the beauty spot. The lips, of course, are "rubies", half open to show the "pearls of the teeth". Finally the lithe figure of the *shâhed* is "a cypress gracefully passing on its way", "a cypress endowed with every charm" (*sarv-é-naz*). This is a mere selection of the commonest phrases: the list could be continued indefinitely.

"When Vis, whose body was white as silver but whose heart was as hard as steel, raised her slender form erect, like a noble cypress, his mind was struck with amaze at the sight: he knew not what name to give to the idol he saw before him. At one moment, he thought, she was like a garden in spring, for her lip was like the brilliantly coloured tulips, her hair was as smooth as the violet, her eyes were as langourous as the eyes of lilies, her cheeks had the colours of the rose and the tulip. Again, she seemed to him like a garden in autumn in which are found the fruits of the equinox: her black hair was like clusters of grapes, her chin an apple, her breasts two pomegranates. Yet again, she was a royal treasure towards which men's glances looked up in longing; her cheek was of brocade, her body of silk; the perfume of her curls and tresses resembled musk and ambergris; her body was of silver, her lip the purest ruby, her teeth were pearls of the finest water."

In his "Book for Lovers" (*Ushshâq-nâma*) 'Ubaid-i Zâkânî describes the object of his passion in the following terms:



"An idol with a face marked by good fortune, of auspicious bearing, a king of the land of beauty, adorable among the adorable: Shirin<sup>1</sup> could do no more than glean a few scraps of his sweetness. His face brought into harmony the rose petals of grace, his body exceeded the cypress in elegance... The hyacinths of his curls shaded the rose of his cheek. The ruby bird (the tongue) lay hidden in the necklace of pearls (the teeth), and his sugared speech was the provender of the soul. His two eyes were like magicians casting powerful spells, his two tresses like a caravan laden with musk from Tartary."

And Sa'di has these lines:

"In this flower-bed where the beauteous rose-tree bloomed  
There grew the tall cypress, seeking to obtain reparation.  
Why did the rose, hundred-leaved, blossom so sweetly?  
Why did the fir-tree grow to such shape and size? This I know not.  
Gracefully the loved one sat down by Sa'di last night:  
The torment was eased, but when he sought to go Sa'di was in despair."

On these and similar themes the Persian poets wove endless variations. In order to share the pleasure which they took in them, and which they conveyed to their readers—or rather to their listeners, for Persian verse was meant to be sung—we must be at home in a whole system of symbolism, the roots of which plunge deep into the remote past of the Oriental soul.

Thus the cypress, perpetually green, is the tree of life of the ancient religions, the sacred tree of Zoroaster; and its erect posture charges it with still other meanings.

Similarly the ruby of the lips and the pearls of the teeth also have their deeper meanings. The former represents the drunkenness which is produced by wine (also symbolised by the ruby); the pearls represent the inviolate object which is to be pierced and, more fundamentally, the primal pearl which, in the most venerable theogonies of the East, burst open to give birth to the world.

Again, the black hair which captivates all hearts, the black eyes, the black brows and the eyelashes which launch their fatal darts are contrasted, in an unconscious survival of the Mazdian and Manichean dualisms, with the brightness of the rose-like cheeks and the moon-like face which are the bringers of joy.

There is scope for endless discussion of the implications of images like these, which to the Western reader seem mere clichés and stereotypes but to the Persian poets, and to those who are able to appreciate their verse, awaken echoes which sound in infinite variety through every corner of the soul.

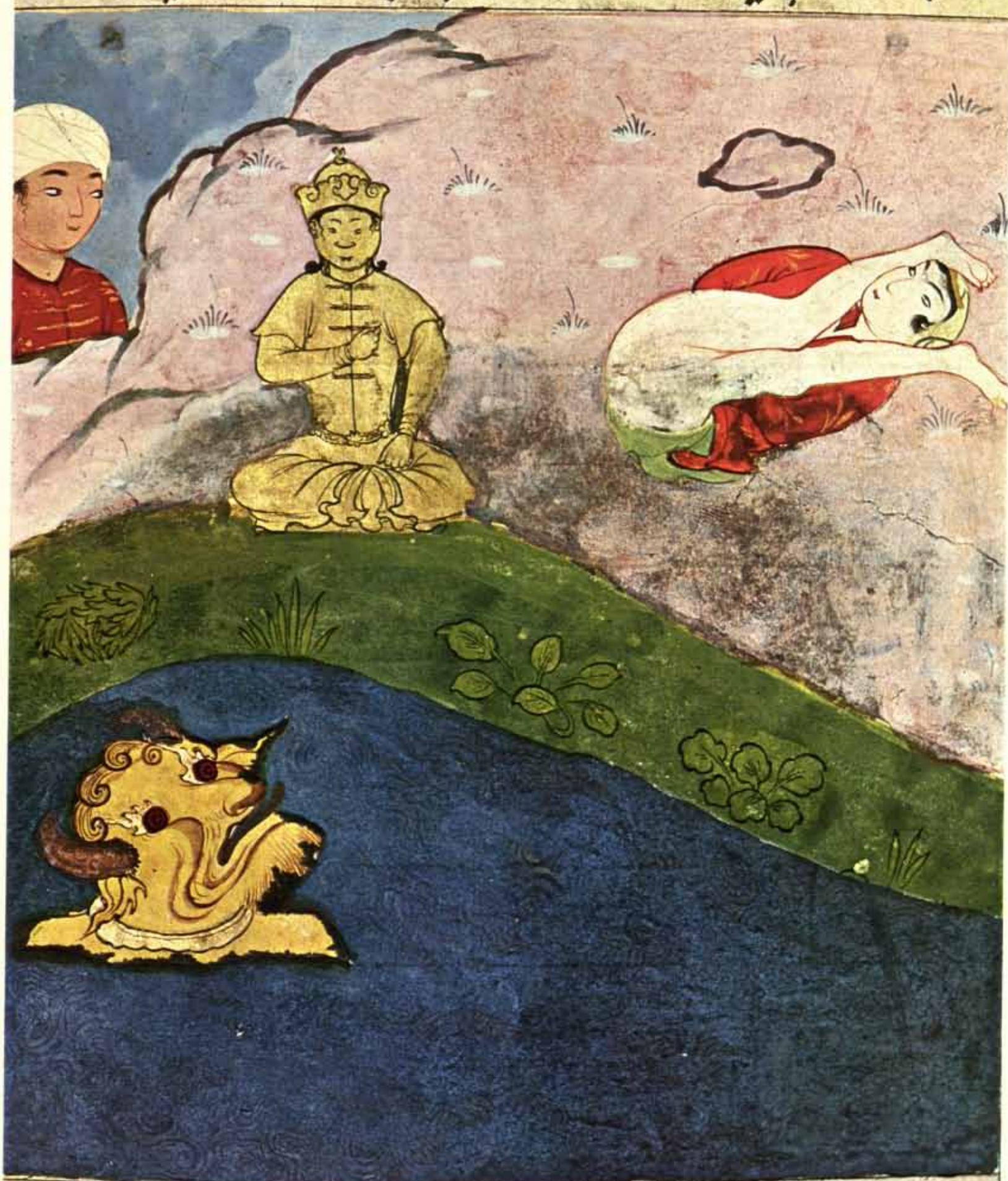
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<sup>1</sup> Shirin, the name of the heroine of the well-known romance, means "sweet".



و دیوی سپهر از آن آب بر آورده بآن بست می مکرد و زنی را در جای  
 علوله بند کرده و پاهای در کردن انداخته چنانچه فسیح وی نمایان گشته و هر



و هر مرد که آنجا رسد بدان طلسم گرفتار گشته بصورت جانوران گردد این  
 مقدار گفته شد و الحمد لله علی ناقله و در سنه ۸۰۰ شمس از ری



بستان دیر و ج  
مردم بر سید مدح و ثواب

زده مسک بر نقره خام خویش









The joys and the trials of love, and the circumstances which lead up to them and accompany them, are described in accordance with equally well established conventions. Thus we have the hearts which "bleed" or are "on fire", the tears which are "pearls pierced by the lashes" or are of blood or of rubies—to mention only the classical incidents of amorous literature. Love is born—at least in the courtly romances—in an infinite variety of ways: the two lovers may meet in a dream, or the lover may see a portrait of the loved one (*Khusrau and Shîrîn*, *Haft Paikar*), or the wind may blow aside the curtains of a litter (*Vîs and Râmîn*). Almost always, immediately after the moment of love at first sight, a messenger (*ghâsed*) appears, ready to depict to the loved one all the sufferings of the lover and by his eloquence prepare the way for the first meeting.

This in itself is a significant commentary on the obstacles which Oriental manners put in the way of an incipient love affair. In lyric poetry the *ghâsed* is often represented by the morning breeze. Thus, for example, we find in Hâfiz:

"O zephyr of the morning, if thy course should take thee into the country of my  
Beloved  
Let thy breath bring back the amber perfume of his hair."

Or again:

"O zephyr, do not avoid the dwelling of my Beloved,  
And when thou returnest, do not refuse to speak of him to the despairing lover."

We must note also that in licentious poetry (for example in Suzanî and Zâkânî—except in the latter's *Ushshâq-nâma*, which is concerned with noble love) the term *ghâsed* seems often to be used in a very different sense from "messenger".

The functions of the *ghâsed* are of prime importance, for it is his task to persuade the reluctant and to remove obstacles. Other regular characters are the malignant rival (*raghib*), represented as hostile and given to slanderous misrepresentation, and the *aghiyâr* ("the others"), persons of ill will, who bring to life under these poetic designations all the jealousy and backbiting of the small towns—Shiraz, Isfahan and the rest—in which the poets of classical Iran lived and flourished.

Finally there is the *vesâl*, the meeting, which may also be the moment of union, whether lawful or unlawful. As we have already seen (page 35), this is sometimes described in fairly direct terms, but we also find it most touchingly celebrated by Sa'dî:

"During the night spent in the arms of my beloved,  
If I am burned like a branch of aloe, I shall feel no pain.  
When a man's wish has been granted to him, he has no fear of death;  
For where is the arrow of ill fortune?"



The joys of the *vesâl* are of course accompanied by wine and music, those indispensable auxiliaries of the pleasures of love. In their amorous encounters Vis and Râmîn, Khusrau and Shirîn, and the other heroes and heroines of the courtly romances, always have a wine cup in their hand, and the pleasures of music are combined with those of dalliance. Consider, too, the lines by Hâfiz:

"His curls in disarray, perspiring, laughing, drunk,  
His garments torn, singing a poem, his glass in his hand,  
With challenging eye and enchanting mouth,  
He came, last night at midnight, and sat beside my couch;  
Then bent his head and whispered in my ear, in accents sad:  
'O my erstwhile loved one, art thou asleep?'  
The lover to whom such wine as this is offered in the dawn  
Turns heretic in love unless he becomes a worshipper of wine."

But all things, alas, come to an end; and the union, however close, is often interrupted by separation (*ferâgh*) caused either by fatality or by departure:

"Only he who is a slave of love knows how long  
The night separation lasts ere dawn shall come."  
(Sa'dî)

The conceptions of *vesâl* and *ferâgh* also have their mystical aspects. The former also means the metaphysical union with the Divine; the latter the state of spiritual solitude of the adept who has merely glimpsed the supreme light and has then fallen back to earth. Here again the poets make the most of the varied range of associations summoned up by these words.

\* \*

The themes and the spirit of Persian love poetry are found also in art, and particularly in painting. There are many passages, from ancient times onwards, describing the splendid decorations of princely residences and private houses. Most of these buildings have disappeared, and along with them have gone the frescoes which decorated the principal apartments. Those preserved in the palace of Ali Qapu and the Pavilion of the Forty Columns in Isfahan give us some idea of their quality and of the subjects, bacchic and erotic, which they represented. Until quite recent times the walls of private and even public bath-houses were frequently covered with enamel tiles (*kâshi*) illustrating the pleasures of love—often in an allusive fashion, but sometimes also with great coarseness.

The greater part of the heritage left to us by the painters of Iran, however, consists of the works of the miniaturists which are preserved in the manuscripts. The artists who were called on to illustrate works of history or poetry clearly had their choice of theme determined by the subject matter with which they were concerned: accordingly, their imagination had to be confined within fairly narrow







limits, and like the poets who provided their material they were usually constrained to ring the changes on a range of traditional material.

The artists excel in representing, in a style of extreme delicacy, such subjects as fighting, festivities at court, love and courtship, and episodes from the great classical texts. Their particular achievement lies in the art with which they balance lines and volumes and colours, using a language which is no less subtle and abstract than the language of poetry. It is a principle of their art to disregard perspective and eliminate shadows. Moreover the restraints imposed by Islam discourage the study of human anatomy, so that when the Persian painter shows his figures naked—and this is rare, even in erotic scenes—he inevitably shows a certain clumsiness. He has none of those caresses of the pencil or brush which give the works of our Western masters their atmosphere of sensual delight. His merits lie elsewhere.

The achievement of the Persian painters, as of the Persian poets, lay in the virtuosity with which they treated subjects which belonged to a traditional repertoire and were sure to appeal to their audience. Their favourite themes were elegant young persons, their effeminate faces framed in wayward curls, embracing in amorous dalliance amid flowers and trees in which perched many birds; languorous glances and swooning postures; musicians and *alfresco* feasts. It was an art of suggestion rather than description.

The very conventional character of this painting appears most trikingly in the treatment of faces. From the Mongol period (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) onwards the artists of Persia—perhaps in order to please their new masters, perhaps from a taste for the exotic, or perhaps as a matter of personal preference—frequently represented their figures with features of marked Asiatic cast; and this fashion continued into the Safavid period (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries). And did not the poets, for their part, sing of the “gazelles of Khôtân”, or, like Hâfiz, the Turkish beauties of Shiraz, whose moon-like faces and slant eyes seem to have for so long possessed an irresistible erotic attractiveness in Iran?

If we sought to analyse, in the light of some contemporary theories, the soul of a country which had a natural inclination to take delight in the torments of love we should be tempted to see an element of masochism in this exaltation of a racial type which was associated with the havoc wrought over a period of centuries by the ferocity of the barbarian conquerors from the steppes of Turkestan.







## THE POETS AND LOVE

Restricted as it may seem to us, the stock of images used by the Persian poets during a period of over a thousand years enabled them to achieve an almost infinite range of variations, and to reflect in their work all the differences in character, literary fashion and human experience which marked successive centuries.

The work of the earliest lyric poets, like the courtly romances which we have already considered, has all the features of a polite literature intended for the entertainment of the higher ranks of society. Usually panegyric, descriptive or bacchic rather than erotic, often following Arab models, it suggests, in its different way, the same atmosphere as we find in the romances of *Vis and Râmîn* and *Khusrau and Shirîn*. It contains little in the way of violent passion: the poets were more at home with prettily turned verses in honour of the beloved or with accounts of their amorous successes than with the expression of overmastering desire.

Consider, for example, Rûdakî (d. 940):

"Knowst thou, my fair one with hair black as ebony,  
What he was like, thy servant, once upon a time?  
Thou who art so proud of these same curly locks,  
Thou didst not know him when he had more than thee,  
And when he had—alas, that time has flown!—  
A skin as soft as satin, and hair as black as pitch.  
How many beauties then his glance attracted,  
Dazzled by him, as he in turn was dazzled!  
The time has flown when he, lively and cheerful always,  
Attracted joy and caused despair to flee.  
He spent his gold most freely, ever ready with his bid  
If some fair Turk with rounded breast were offered in the mart."



Or Farrukhî (d. 1038):

"O memory of that night! A fair one who eclipsed all others  
Afforded me all bliss until the call to prayer.  
We lay within her chamber, sharing our secret only with the wine,  
The door of pleasure open, but closed her chamber door.  
Now, as we talked, my breast was bound to hers;  
Now, in a kiss, my lip conveyed to hers a secret;  
Fast clinging to the chain formed by her curls,  
As suppliants pull the chain to ring the bell summoning the king.  
The moon in heaven was surprised when this earthly moon raised the cup to her  
lips;  
And the bright day was turned to night when the fair one pulled her curls over her  
cheek.  
I aspired to keep her as my own; but she, to the desire of my heart,  
While I sang for her, was playing the zither.  
With what pride she caressed the zither!  
With what delicacy I sang a poem!  
The fair one, to rejoice my heart, played a new melody,  
Starting a fresh tune, choosing another tone.  
Were fortune with me, and the prince's power,  
Then would I pass another night like that."

The poets of this school did not, however, escape the questionings of philosophic doubt, which are poignantly expressed in much of their verse. Where do we come from? Whither are we bound? To questions such as these they sometimes seek an answer, but in vain. Why was this world created? What purpose do our sufferings serve? How should we order our lives amid so many uncertainties? Enjoy the little pleasure our brief life affords, and forget the rest: this is the constant theme of Omar Khayyam (d. 1132). Let us be drunk with wine and love, he says, but above all with wine; for love, as it is depicted in his verses, seems to have little to offer compared with the juice of the grape:

"The season of roses, on the river's bank, near the garden,  
A few boon companions, a being as fair as the houris:  
Hold out thy cup, for those who drink in the morning  
Care not for mosque or synagogue."



"Since our stay in this world is but transient,  
To remain without wine and without love would be a great sin.  
What serves it to talk of archetypes or of creation, O righteous one?  
When I am gone, what shall I care whether the universe results from one or the  
other?"



"That heavenly wheel turns but to destroy us, thee and me,  
And seeks but to injure our pure soul.



Sit down, my idol, on the green grass, for soon  
The green grass will grow from our clay, thine and mine."

An earlier poet, Rûdakî, had professed the same doctrine, but was more concerned with the joys of love:

"With the black-eyed fair ones let us pass our time merrily:  
The world is but a tale, a breath which passes.  
Let us not greet the present with gloom,  
And of days past let us not speak.  
I will think only of these perfumed curls  
And of the charms of this daughter of the houris.  
Happy the man who has known how to enjoy and to give:  
Pity the man who could do neither!  
Winds and clouds: life is but a mirage.  
Pour out the wine, happen what may!"

Themes of this kind constantly recur in the works of this early period. If we wanted to relate Iranian thought to different influences from the classical West, we should be tempted to see this poetry as an expression of an Epicurean philosophy in radical contrast with the Platonism which was to prevail a little later.

In love, wine and music Rûdakî, Khayyam and their contemporaries sought above all forgetfulness of the vanities of this world and of the insoluble problems of metaphysics. For their successors love, wine and music were to inspire urges of a very different kind. In the eleventh century Sufism (Moslem mysticism) made its first notable appearance in Persian poetry with Sanâ'î; it strengthened its hold with 'Attâr (d. 1220), and established itself finally with Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî (d. 1273). This is a major turning point in the development of thought and feeling in Iran; and it is significant that it occurred during one of the most sombre periods in the history of the country, the time of the great Turkish invasions and the irruption of the Mongols.

In the earliest centuries of Islam, Sufism—the origins of which have not been clearly established—set out all over the Moslem world, by means of its metaphysical speculations, to breathe fresh life into a religion of mere mechanical observance. It took on a particular colouring in Persia from the numerous Mazdian and other survivals which it assimilated. It also played an important rôle in the intellectual and spiritual life of the country almost into our own day, imbuing lyric poetry with its particular modes of thought and expression.

Diverse in the extreme are the paths of Sufism, all of them converging on the internal illumination which is the source of ecstasy and mystical union. But through the variety of doctrines and systems propounded by the various masters and brotherhoods the methods of Sufism express a single philo-















sophy impregnated with pantheism and neo-Platonism: every human creature bears within itself, under the veil of the body, a divine spark which the adept must attempt to free from its fleshly prison so that it may return to the universal principle. All means to this end are good: meditation, the recital of certain formulae, wine, music, dancing, even drugs; but the surest form of asceticism, of self-discipline, is still that achieved by love:

"The soul which is not marked by true love—  
Better it were not born. Its existence is but shame.  
Be drunk with love. All is love.  
Without performance of love there is no access to the Loved One.  
Thou art asked, What is love? Then reply, Love is to give up free will;  
And he who does not free himself from his will has no will."

(Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî).

The path of love must lead directly towards God; but it may also pass through the intermediary of the *shâhed*. It is not so long since the traveller on the roads of Persia used to meet the wandering dervishes, wearing the felt cap which indicated by its particular shape the brotherhood to which they belonged, carrying the *kashkul*<sup>1</sup> and the axe which were their distinctive attributes, and often accompanied by a handsome young disciple, the *shâhed*, with whom their relationship was not necessarily other than innocent.

The most sublime example of the ambivalence of such sentimental relationships is afforded by the great poet Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî (1207–1272), known as Maulânâ ("our Master"), the founder of the order of Whirling Dervishes. His revelation came to him from his meeting with one of the "fools of God", Shams al-Dîn Tabrizî, who appeared suddenly in his life and disappeared again almost at once—probably killed by jealous disciples. Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî's spiritual love for this master was so great that it inspired a *divân* of several thousand passionate lines. This work is known under the title of the *Divân of Shams al-Dîn Tabrizî*, for the author carried his passion to the point of identifying himself with the object of his love and signing his poems with the name of his master rather than his own.

"And now this moon returns of which heaven itself dared not dream,  
Bearing a fire which no wave could quench.  
Look on my body's dwelling-place, look on my soul:  
The wine-cup of my love makes drunk the one, destroys the other.  
Let the master of the tavern<sup>2</sup> become the companion of my heart,  
And love will transmute my blood to wine, will burn my heart."

<sup>1</sup> A wooden begging bowl.

<sup>2</sup> The tavern symbolises the meeting place of the mystics; wine represents the drunkenness which is brought on by the perception of the divine.



And again:

"Happy the moment when we are seated in the portico, thou and I,  
In two forms and two appearances, but yet a single soul, thou and I.  
The brightness of the flowers, the harmonies of the birds will cause the waters of immortality to flow for us.  
When we enter the garden, thou and I,  
The stars of the firmament will gaze down on us.  
As they watch, we shall cause the moon herself to appear, thou and I.  
Thou and I—no longer thou and I—shall unite in ecstasy:  
Happy, and freed from our maze of error, thou and I.  
And what a wonder it is that thou and I, seated in our corner,  
Should at this moment be at once in Iraq and Khurasan, thou and I!"

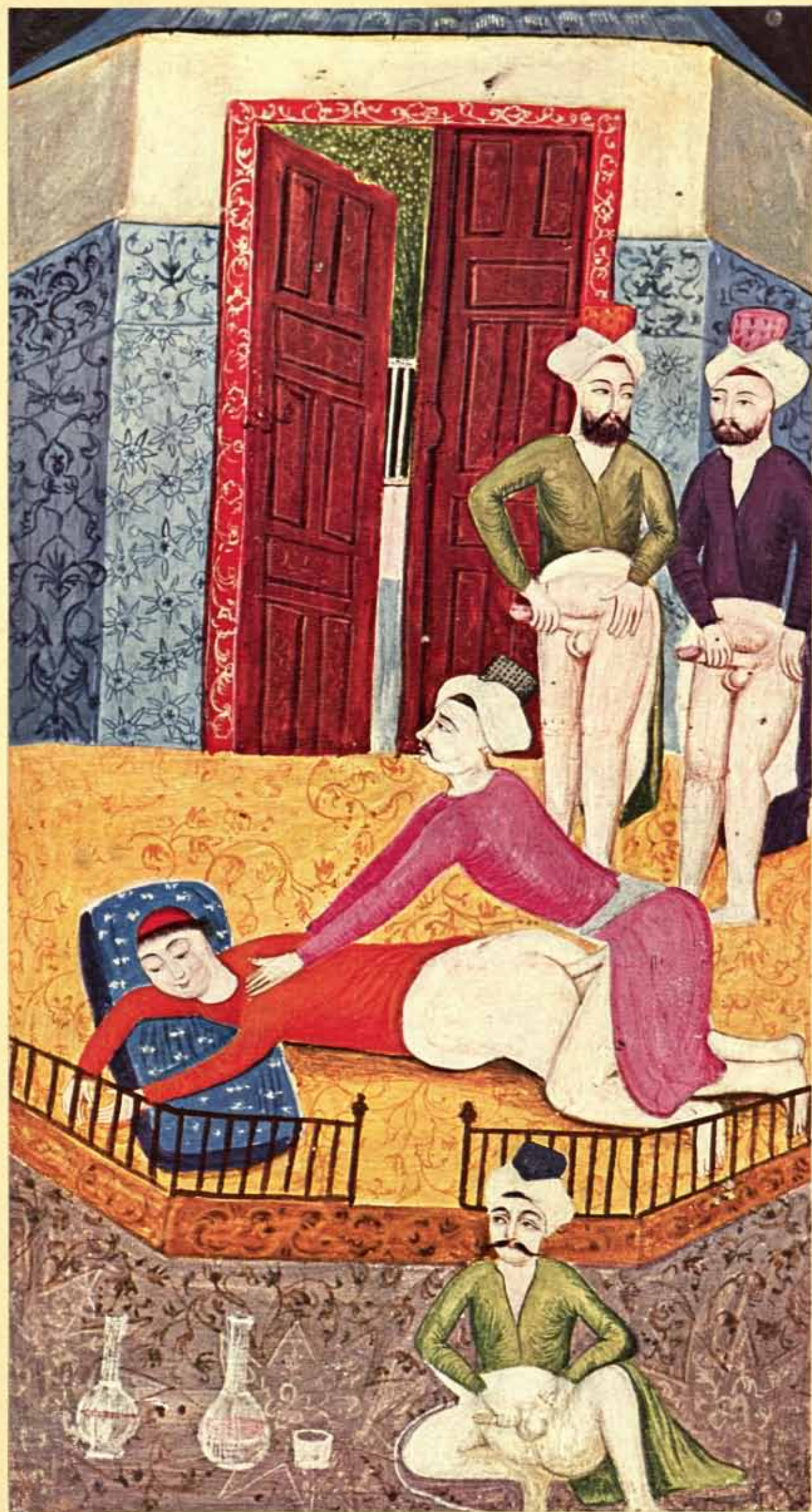
Elsewhere, calling back the master who has left him, the poet sees in their spiritual love and in the divine love a single passion and a single experience:

"Return, return, for never again shalt thou find such a friend as I:  
A beloved one such as I, where is he to be found in this world?  
Return, return: squander thy life no longer, wandering here and there.  
There is no market for thy coins but mine.  
Thou art a dried-up valley, I am the rain;  
Thou art a town in ruins, I am the builder.  
Outside my service, which is the dawn of bliss,  
No one has ever seen, or ever shall, a sign of joy.  
In thy dream are a thousand moving forms:  
The dream is past, and not a soul is there."

Although with less fire than in Maulânâ's work, the language of love is used also by mystics like 'Attâr and Erâghi (1213–1289) to describe the sublime passion which is consuming them:

"The first wine poured into the cup  
Has been drawn from the drunken eyes of the cupbearer...  
The wine-coloured lip of the Beloved supplies the cup,  
And this wine is called the wine of lovers.  
The curls of our idols know no rest,  
So many the hearts they torment...  
This lip desired by all  
Grants to the lovers naught but abuse.  
To conquer a fresh heart each moment  
These beauties have made their hair into a trap.  
With a single glance they say a hundred words to the soul,  
And in a single frown send the heart two hundred messages.  
They whisper a secret one moment to some confidential friend,  
And then at once publish it to all the world.  
All the sorrows diffused throughout the universe  
They have assembled, and name the total love.











And having thus themselves given out their secret,  
Why should they then slander Erâghi?"

(Erâghi).

The readiness with which poets like these mystics, in love with the absolute, borrowed their imagery from the language of human passion has its counterpart in the profound mark which their works left on the love poetry of later centuries. Few indeed were the Persian writers who had not explored the Path at some stage of their career—though this did not inhibit them from seeking other forms of experience as well. In any event it very soon became an accepted convention of literary style that the odes addressed by the poets to those whose favours they were seeking should suggest that the object of the quest went beyond the union of the flesh to the union of souls or, at an even higher level, the union of the soul with the Absolute. Thus the poems celebrate not so much the loved one (who, once again, is hardly ever named or individualised) as the emotions of love in their most abstract form—in other words, "love in itself".

We find for example, a *ghazal* of Sa'di's which begins by describing a merry party which ends only with the dawn, but concludes with some lines which, in another context, would naturally be interpreted in a spiritual sense:

"The torch is almost out: come and sit down, my child.  
Gazing upon thy face at dawn brings on the full light of day.  
Songstress, the friends are gone; cupbearer, those overcome by drunkenness are  
asleep.  
But our *shâhed* remains; the party still goes on.  
The nightingale's song in the garden foretells the dawn.  
In the portico is heard the crowing of the cocks.  
In thee I have established my dwelling and all that in it is:  
And all that thou acceptest, let it be banned to all.  
Release me if thou wilt; tighten my bonds if thou prefer:  
For none escapes the snare of a hunter such as thou.  
He who has never entered the flames knows not the fierce heat in which I burn;  
But he who has once been burned knows the cost of a young man's passion.  
In former days I sought to avoid ill fame, but now  
I care not for the stone, now that my cup is smashed.  
If Sa'di despises his reputation, what matter?  
He who would stick at that is no traveller on the road of Love."

We find the same themes in the famous lines addressed by Hâfiz to some fickle friend:

"Cupbearer, set our cup aglow with the brightness of wine.  
Sing, O thou singing-girl, for destiny has fulfilled our desires.  
In the wine-cup we have seen reflected the face of the loved one.  
O ye who know not the joys of an eternal carouse, I tell you,



That man is immortal whose heart has been cheered by love;  
 And our eternity is written in the Book of the World...  
 O zephyr, if thou pass through the rose-garden of my friends,  
 Take care thou bring our message to the adored one.  
 Say to him, Why strive for forgetfulness?  
 The time of forgetfulness will come unasked."



The "Shaikh" Sa'dî (1193-1280) undoubtedly offers in his work and life the completest incarnation of the Persian mind. His writings, covering a period of over half a century, are an unequalled expression of all its varied and often contradictory aspects. He was interested in every facet of life, ready to pursue every branch of study, to dare every adventure, to try every form of experience. His travels took him into Central Asia, India, the Yemen, Syria (where he was captured by the Crusaders) and Anatolia: in other words, through most of the Islamic world of his day. Returning at last to his native city of Shiraz, he devoted his remaining years to putting the final touches to his large body of poems and to condensing his experience of life into two brief treatises, the *Gulistân* ("Rose-garden") and the *Bûstân* ("Orchard"), both of which convey their message in the form of anecdotes. The tone of his poetry—celebrating now the mystical quest, now the enterprises of the flesh—together with the confessions which occur so frequently in his work, bear witness to a fervent passion for all that can be loved—created things as well as the Creator: that is, a passion, above all, for love, both worldly and mystical.

As he recounts his memories he shows himself on occasion as one who "in the days when he was in the flower of youth" was given to proffering fair words to beautiful youths; and we gather from hints here and there that even in old age it was a pastime that still appealed to him. Although he had sat at the feet of the most eminent spiritual teachers of his day, such as Suhrawardî, and though their teaching left a profound mark on him, Sa'dî himself preferred a middle way. His writings express a cheerful system of morality, flexible, humane and indulgent: a broadminded approach to life which made allowance for human weakness. Indeed there are indications in Sa'dî's work that he was not averse from an occasional bout of riotous living.

The poems in his *divâns* express conceptions which are essentially Platonic. They celebrate the splendour of beauty, the pains and the joys of a love which always claims to transcend its fleshly object, but nevertheless takes pleasure in that object. For the most part, therefore, they are capable of a double interpretation, literal and worldly on the one hand, allegorical and metaphysical on the other: an ambiguity which is promoted by the fluidity of the imagery and the subtlety with which it is developed.









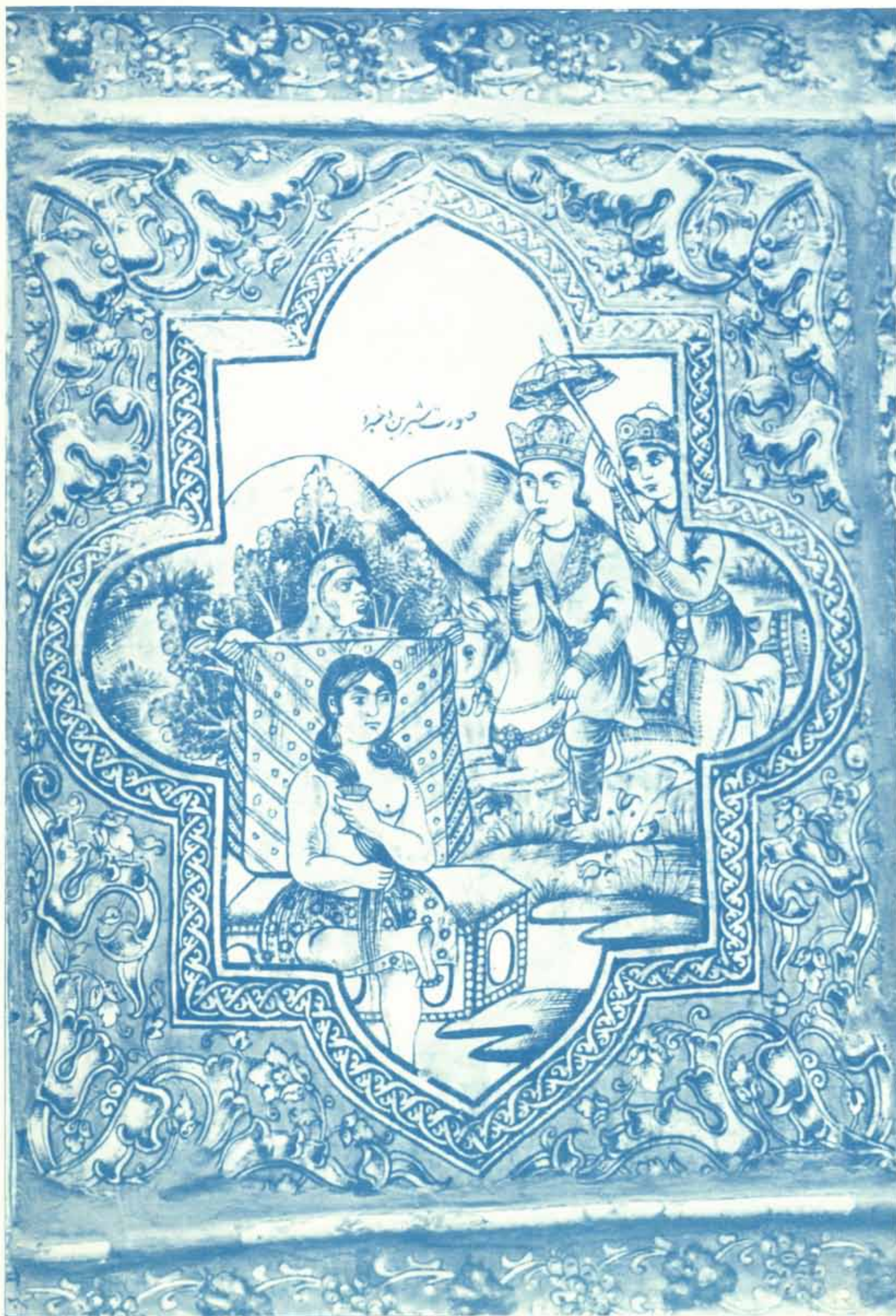




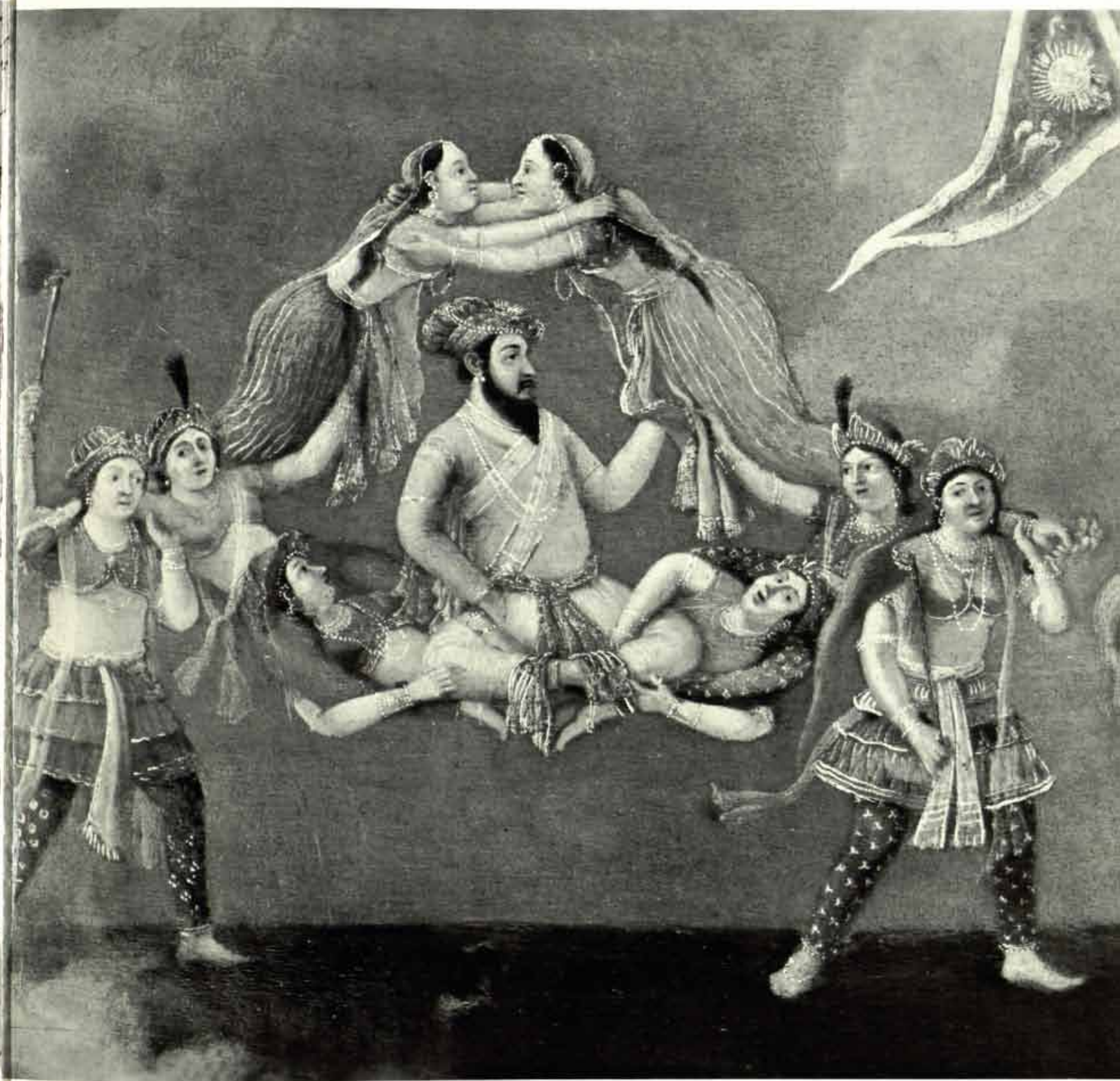










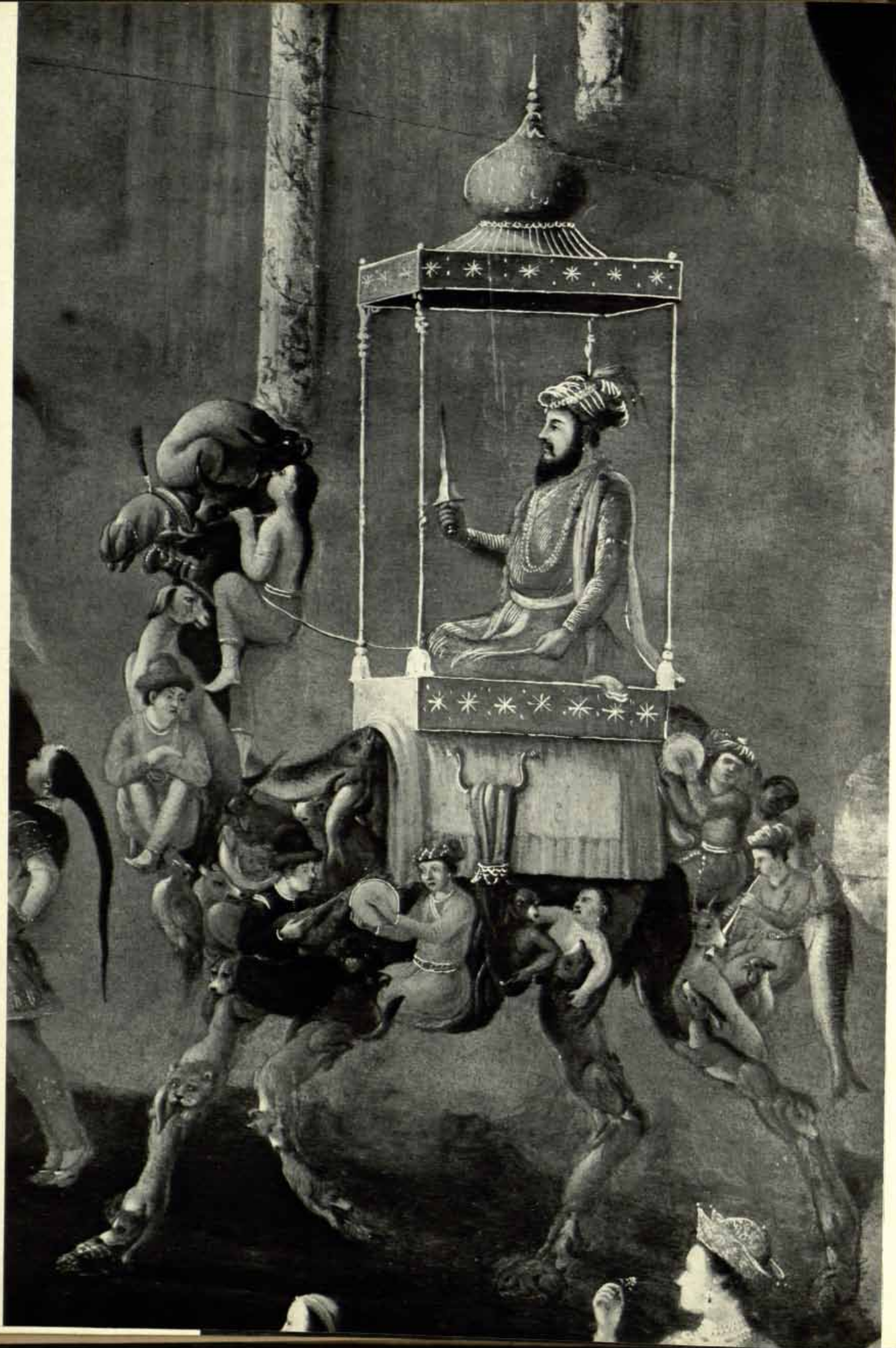






Aghier  
Jangier  
Shah Jahan  
Shahbegum  
Darashahko  
Sultan'souja  
Nurunnave  
Moratboe







All this was well calculated to appeal to Persian taste, and provided a model which was often imitated but rarely equalled.



A century later, Hâfiz (d. 1389), surpassing even the stylistic resources of his predecessor, carried the art of poetry in Iran to its peak. The semi-religious admiration surrounding this poet was so strong that a tradition was soon established giving his *divân* the status of a kind of book of divination. A man who is in any uncertainty or difficulty has only to open the collection of *ghazals* at random, to select a number of lines according to certain accepted rules, and to meditate on them, and he will find the answer to his problem. The author of this essay has often adopted this method, with remarkable results.

There is, of course, no mystery about the matter. Hâfiz, the subtlest and most delicate poet in all Persian literature, charged his writing with so many meanings and overtones that any single verse is open to a whole gamut of possible interpretations: the reader has only to select whichever interpretation best suits his purpose.

Most of the Master's odes give expression, in infinite verbal coruscations, to mystical love, profane love, and the cult of wine; frequently, too, they contain a delicate tribute to some patron whose favour the poet is seeking. Scholars will long continue to argue about the nature of their ultimate inspiration; though we must recognise that such disputes are vain, since the author himself was concerned to leave open the possibility of these varying interpretations, and indeed this is the very essence of his art. Is it not better simply to accept that in Shâh Shujâ the Magnificent, sovereign of Shiraz, whom he often designates "king of Beauty", the poet saw at the same time the beloved friend who on occasion could be capricious and indifferent, the munificent patron, and perhaps also the *shâhed*, the earthly manifestation of the supreme splendour? Thus:

"O king of Beauty, I cry for respite in the pangs of solitude.  
Without thee my heart is near to death. Return, it is time thou came!  
The flowers in this garden will not preserve their freshness for ever:  
Have pity on the weak while thou still hast thy strength.  
Last night I complained to the zephyr about this hair of thine.  
The zephyr said: 'O foolish one, give up these gloomy thoughts:  
In the morning a hundred zephyrs, laden with chains, dance in his curls!'  
Such is the one thou lovest, O my heart: give up, then, every hope.  
Desire and thy absence have led me astray, far from the ford of patience.  
O God, to whom may I confide the subtle secret that here on earth  
This omnipresent beauty nowhere unveils itself?  
Cupbearer, the grass and the rose, if thy face does not appear, lose all their colour.  
Come forward with thy graceful step, O box-tree, to restore the garden's splendour.



The torments I endure for thee are my elixir on this wretched couch;  
 The memory of thee is a sweet companion in my solitary retreat.  
 On the circumference of destiny I represent the point of resignation.  
 Grace is confounded with thy thought, truth with thy order.  
 To think of oneself, to judge for oneself: in the world of the dervishes these things  
 are not permitted.  
 In this rite selfishness and indiscipline are accounted heresies.  
 Under this disc of azure my heart bleeds. Pour out the wine!  
 In this blue enamel cup I will seek the meaning of this puzzle."

\* \* \*

At the end of a long study of Sa'di the Italian orientalist Alessandro Bausani, who has given us such luminous insights into Persian literature, has this to say: "Sa'di's readers cannot but be taken aback by the contrast between his light poems, which set out to describe fleshly union or the act against nature with no thought of wrapping it up in the veiled language of poetry, and the delicacy and refinement of the serious part of his art. This is not Sa'di's fault, but rather a consequence of the basic conditions of that art, its inability to find a happy mean between coitus on one hand and the Platonic 'death in love' on the other."

It is true that Persian poetry, side by side with its great tradition of the courtly style, also cultivated less creditable fields, which as a rule are decently ignored by the editors of texts. We think, for example, of the collections of *Hazaliyât* (bawdy tales) and *Tayyibât* (ribaldries). Either for amusement, or in reaction against the straitjacket imposed on them by moral and literary conventions, many of the great writers of Iran allowed themselves to write verses which are not only devoid of any claim to wit but cannot readily be translated even into Latin.

According to the tradition—though this is not generally accepted—the oldest known master of this genre was Azraqî (d. 1132), the illustrious panegyrist of the Seljuk prince Tughânshâh. Jâmî tells us:

"Azraqî of Herat (may God be merciful to him!) was a poet versed in the rules of his art, greatly skilled, a man of accomplishment in knowledge and wisdom. There came to his patron (Tughânshâh) a most untoward mishap: his copulative power was found deficient, and the doctors knew not how to put the trouble right. Azraqî composed his verse treatise *De mentula et vulva*, illustrating it with miniatures, and then caused a marriage to be contracted between one of the pages at the court of the Padishah and a slave girl. He had the two young people introduced into the royal harem, the king having concealed himself behind an openwork screen. He then put his book into their hands, requiring them to perform the various figures, and recommended the king to observe them from his hiding-place. At the rehearsal of such scenes the precious ardour was restored; the matter, resembling curdled cheese, which had been



preventing the erection of the royal organ was dispersed, being now cast out by the meatus. And so the required object was attained."

The work attributed to Azraqî has, unfortunately, been lost.

The pious Sa'dî himself was—as he confides to us—compelled by the caprice of certain young princes who threatened him with death to compose a selection of pieces "in the manner of Suzanî" (d. 1173). This is the origin of his light poems and his prose *Merry and Facetious Gatherings*, written in a ludicrously pompous style. All of these are now relegated to the end of his works; but they display such verve that we must suppose that the author took a certain pleasure in these discreditable diversions.

His predecessor Suzanî had fewer scruples, for his *Divân* begins with a number of *hazaliyât*, which take up a considerable part of the work. According to one of his biographers the poet owed his *nom de plume* to his love for a young needle-maker (*suzan*—needle).

U'Ubaid-i Zâkânî (d. 1371), the Persian Pietro Aretino, was no more concerned than Suzanî about his reputation. An impenitent debauchee and at the same time a pitiless critic of the manners of his day, he devoted more than half his writings to the pleasures of the flesh in all their forms—though in fact there is little variation in his description of them. His *Epistle on the Habits of the Great* and his *Hundred Precepts* turn the accepted rules of morality upside down in the most scandalous fashion, and his *Anecdotes*, written in Arabic and Persian, bring together a collection of tales which for sheer obscenity it would be difficult to equal. Many of his lyrics celebrate in the crudest way the delight he took in unnatural love, and to those who read Persian his *Jalk-nâma* (an epistle *de masturbatione*) offers still another choice diversion.

It is right, after giving this account of U'Ubaid's work, to include an example, fragmentary though it may be, of his style. In his *Epistle on the Habits of the Great* he is always hammering home the lesson that young boys should not grudge their favours to those who solicit them. It is only in this way, he asserts, that when they reach manhood they—like so many of their illustrious predecessors and contemporaries—can enjoy the consideration of the most distinguished literary and military circles, and can thus be sure of a brilliant career. And he goes on to quote examples, carrying irreverence so far as to parody certain well-known verses by Rûdakî, Sa'dî and even Firdausî, the venerated singer of the epic glories of Iran. Here, for example, is his account of the dalliance between Rustam, "that hero with the powerful body", and his companion in arms Hâmûn:

"... When he had undone the cord of his drawers  
He knelt down, the illustrious warrior.  
Then Hâmûn displayed a pillar as formidable as a monster of legend,  
And, as his ancestors had taught him, plunged it, etc....



And now it was Hâmun's turn to submit.  
The vigorous Rustam, that most valiant champion, etc....  
Bearing these many wounds, the two contestants  
Had earned their place among the mightiest warriors.  
Thou too, my brother, like some great champion,  
Wilt be well advised, I assure thee,  
To lie prone, with rump held high,  
Displaying to all thy qualities,  
So that each passer-by, seeing thee, may, etc...."

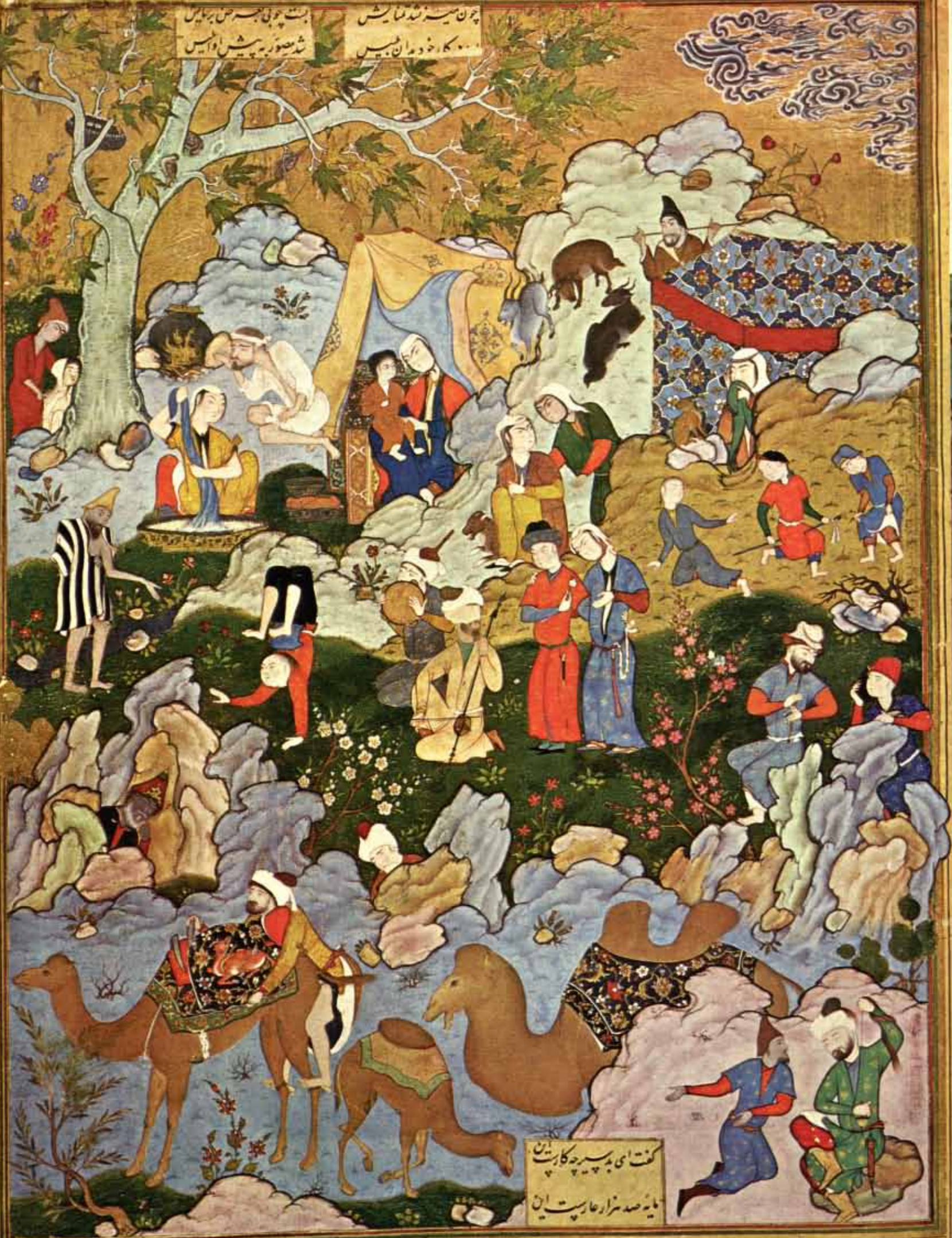
And so on.

The tradition of ribaldry inaugurated by Suzanî and continued by 'Ubaid-i Zâkânî persisted right down to the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, with poets like Mîrzâ Habib Esfahânî, author of the *Kir-nâma* ("De mentula"), Ghaânî (1807-1853), Yaghmâ (1782-1859) and Irâj Mîrzâ (1874-1926) continuing to sing of similar pleasures in the same style.

And, outside the province of literature altogether, the same tradition survived until the other day, in the person of the folk poets who could be hired for the evening in cafés round Teheran, and who regaled their patrons with odes surpassing in obscenity even the works of their illustrious predecessors.



چون میسر شد نمایش  
بست چو بی جسم من بر مایه  
شد صورت بر پیش او آیس  
کار خود مان مایه

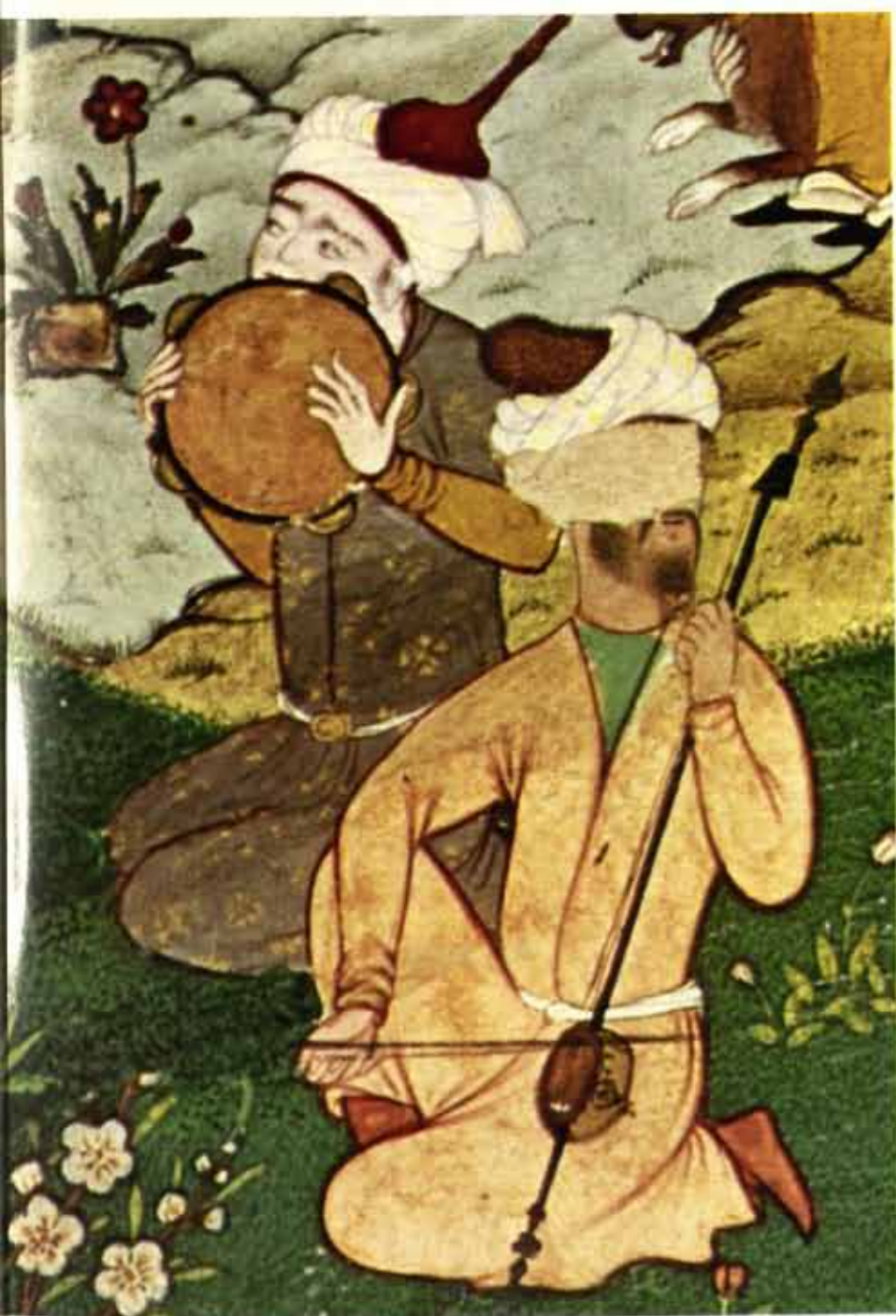


گفت ای پسر چه کار است  
مایه صد هزار عاریت این

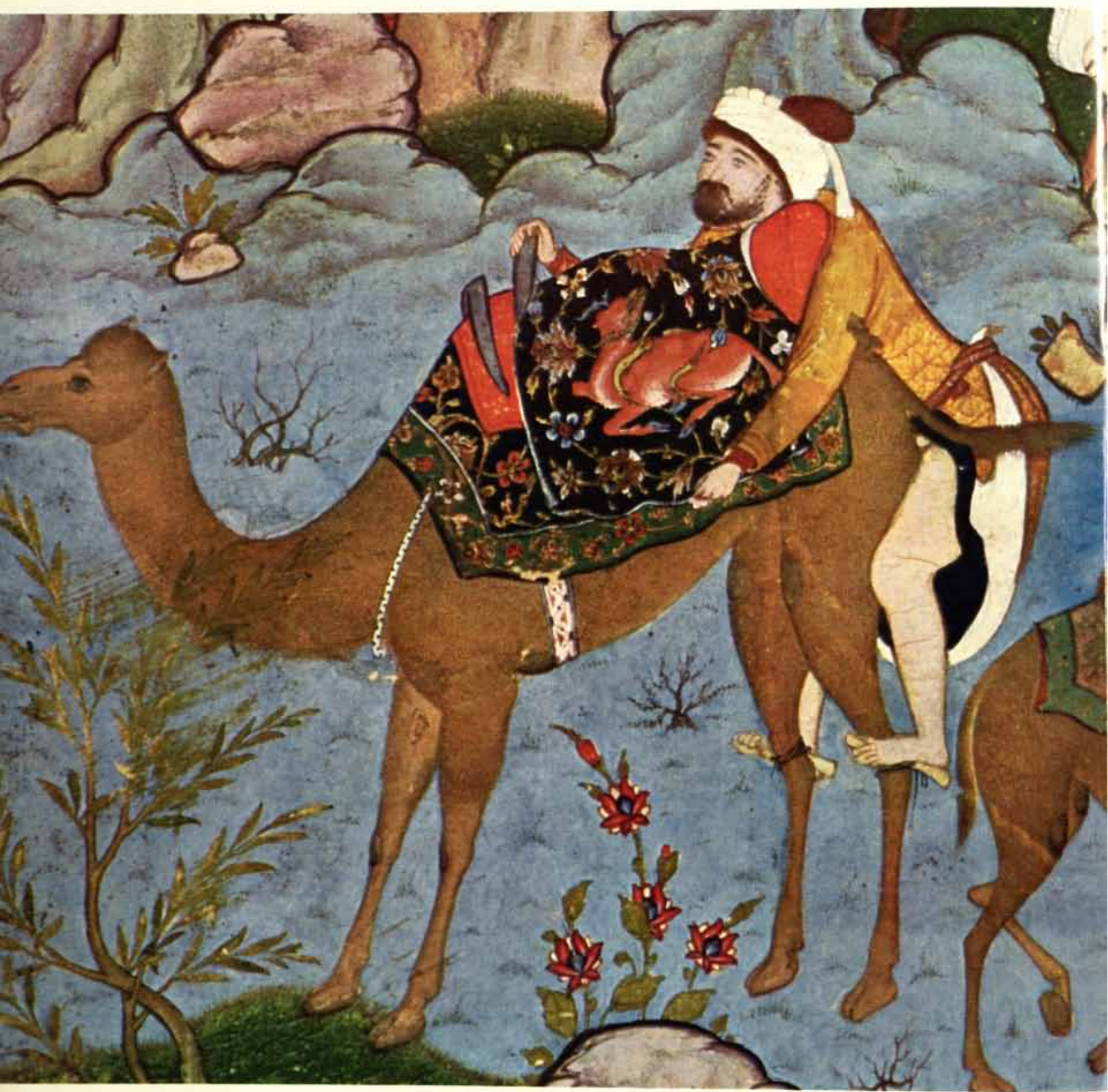














## THE PLACE OF WOMEN

The study of the courtly romances has shown us what the condition of women in the upper ranks of society must have been in ancient Iran and in the early Islamic period. In the course of a few centuries, however, the situation was profoundly changed by the introduction of Moslem manners and customs. Whether girl, wife or paid concubine, a woman was now confined to the harem and had no social contacts with men; she left her house, strictly veiled and guarded, only to go to the baths or to visit her female friends. There was thus no possibility of amorous intrigue, still less of an active love affair.

The French traveller Chardin, who paid several visits to Iran between 1664 and 1677, and wrote an account of his travels which is full of valuable observations, has this to say about Persian women—and the picture he paints was to remain true for a considerable period:

"The women of the king's harem never pay visits outside their palace, and in general the greatest ladies of Persia are those who go out the least. Instead, they cause others to come to them. The manner in which they live does not dispose them, as it seems to me, to make many acquaintances or to undertake great journeys. One sister goes to see another, or a niece to see her aunt, on extraordinary occasions, as it may be for a marriage or a confinement or some solemn feast, but not otherwise. The visits which they pay last, in the ordinary course, seven or eight days; and a woman takes with her the greater part of her train, maidens and eunuchs, and is accompanied by certain supervisors, eunuchs or women, whom her husband gives her for this occasion, in greater or lesser number according to the mistrust he has of her. The royal princesses apply all their efforts to secure that they are frequently summoned to the harem, and they are no sooner returned than they set to their intrigues to be sent for again, though they remain there for eight or ten days together; for in addition to the pleasure they take in it they are ever sent back with rich presents. And husbands likewise are ardently desirous to see their wives summoned thither, for it is a means of conveying to the king secretly those things they wish him to know, and of advancing their fortunes. The wives for their part, having served in the



seraglio, are very ready, for the same reason, to return there; but since they must be sent for, such visits occur seldom. As for the wives of great nobles, if they are not known there they are summoned but rarely. It is said that the master of the harem does not go to his wife while she has visitors, unless it be women whom he has already seen, or whom he is permitted to see, like his mother, his sister or his aunt."

Another French traveller of the *Grand Siècle*, Tavernier, supplements Chardin's picture with the information he was able to glean about the vast mysterious domain of the imperial harem, with its hundreds of wives, slaves and eunuchs:

"There are in Persia many fair women, both swarthy and white. For as both the ones and the others are brought from many different parts, those who carry on the trade in them seek to choose the fairest that may be. The white ones come from Poland, and Muscovy, and Circassia, and Mingrelia and Georgia and the frontiers of Grand Tartary. The swarthy ones come from the lands of the Great Mogul, and the King of Golconda, and the King of Visapur; and as for the black ones, they come from the coast of Melindia and the Red Sea.

"The women of Persia show themselves to no one other than their husbands. When they go to the public baths (which happens only to those of low estate, who cannot have one in their own house) a great veil covers them from head to foot, having only two small holes at the place of the eyes so that they may see their way. They are idle in their houses, concerning themselves with nothing, not even with the running of their household, never eating with their husbands when any stranger whatever is present. Thus in general all things are in the husband's hands, and the wives are in no way mistresses, but rather slaves. They pass the greater part of the day taking tobacco in different fashions; and when they go to the baths vie with one another in showing the finest garments or serving the finest collation. Those who can afford to have slaves to serve them cause them to rub their body—now the arms, now the thighs and the legs—until they fall asleep, leading thus a life given up to pleasure, and being able to have no other diversion in their prison. Thus when a girl is married she has no other company than women or eunuchs, and the women of quality are most closely guarded of all. The higher a man rises in dignity or in possessions the more necessary it is for his glory to have many wives and slaves, and the absolute sway he exerts over them keeps them in good understanding with one another whether they will or not.

"There are two sorts of eunuchs to keep guard on the Sultanas and the wives of the great lords. The first are white, and these are not allowed to come near the women, but are set to guard the first gates of the Harem. The others are black, fearsome of face, and clean cut off, as are likewise the first; and it is these others who guard the inner parts of the Harem. If it is necessary for a woman of quality to go out, several eunuchs go in front of her and behind her with staves in their hands, making the Courouk as they call it, and obliging all passers by to withdraw. When the king's wives are abroad all men must take care, as I have elsewhere said, to keep away from the district for one or two leagues round. For there is a great number of white eunuchs who scour the country for two or three days before to make sure



by dint of blows that no one remains, the black eunuchs always remaining to guard the persons of the wives. If on the day when the king goes out with them it should happen that any man had fallen asleep in a ditch or some other place, and did not withdraw with proper speed, then as soon as he was perceived he would be torn to pieces and killed on the spot without any more ado. Shah Abbas II being abroad with his wives, one of the varlets who had helped with the erection of the pavilions being tired with walking by mischance fell asleep under one of these tents. When the king's wives arrived they found the man asleep and cried out at the sight; whereupon the eunuchs took hold of him without awakening him, bundled him up in the carpets on which he lay, and buried him alive. Shah Safi, father of Shah Abbas II, being likewise travelling one day with his wives, and a peasant who had been denied justice elsewhere coming forward to present his request to him, the Shah, giving him no time to speak, pierced the poor wretch with two arrows, and the man fell dead on the spot; but the prince was much blamed for this action. When the wives pass through a village, though it be in the middle of the night and the depths of winter, all men are required, on being told of their passage, to rise and flee across the snow; and this is the manner in which the wives of the king and the great lords are guarded."

This life of seclusion which was led by the ladies of the court, the aristocracy and the well-to-do middle classes clearly offered little in the way of satisfactions apart from the monotonous pleasures of the toilet and the bath, of music and conversation. In the largest establishments, moreover, the number of those claiming the master's attention was so great that each one of them must have had a very meagre share of his favours. According to Olearius, Shâh Safi (d. 1642)—

"... possessed, in addition to his lawful wives, over three hundred concubines; for all the fairest girls in Persia are brought to him. The greatest lords are ready to offer him the girls from their own houses or the houses of their kinsmen. We saw one day an example of this in the *Calenter* of Schamaschia, who being somewhat in disfavour at court, restored himself to the good graces of the king by the present he made to him of his niece, one of the finest girls in Persia, and by the money which he gave the Chancellor.

"The Armenians, to anticipate the search which is often made among their girls at twelve years of age, marry them off, if they are fair, before they reach that age. So great is the number of concubines that many a time the king is content to lie with them only a single night, after which he presents them to those lords of the court who are farthest advanced in his good graces."

It is hardly surprising that the inmates of the harems, being neglected in this way, should sometimes have sought consolation among themselves:

"The woman of the East," says Chardin, "have ever been said to be given to the Lesbian vice. I have heard it said so often, and by so many people, that this is so, and that they have means of mutually contenting their passions, that I hold it for very certain. They are prevented, so far as may be, from these practices, for it is

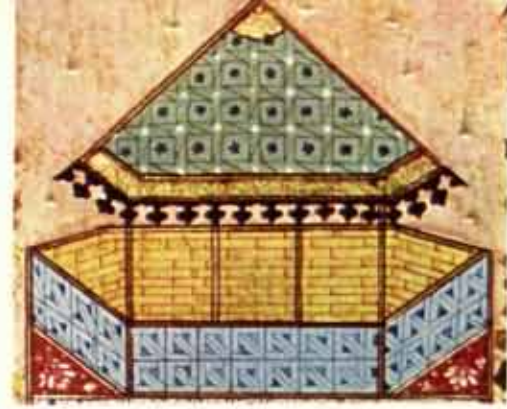














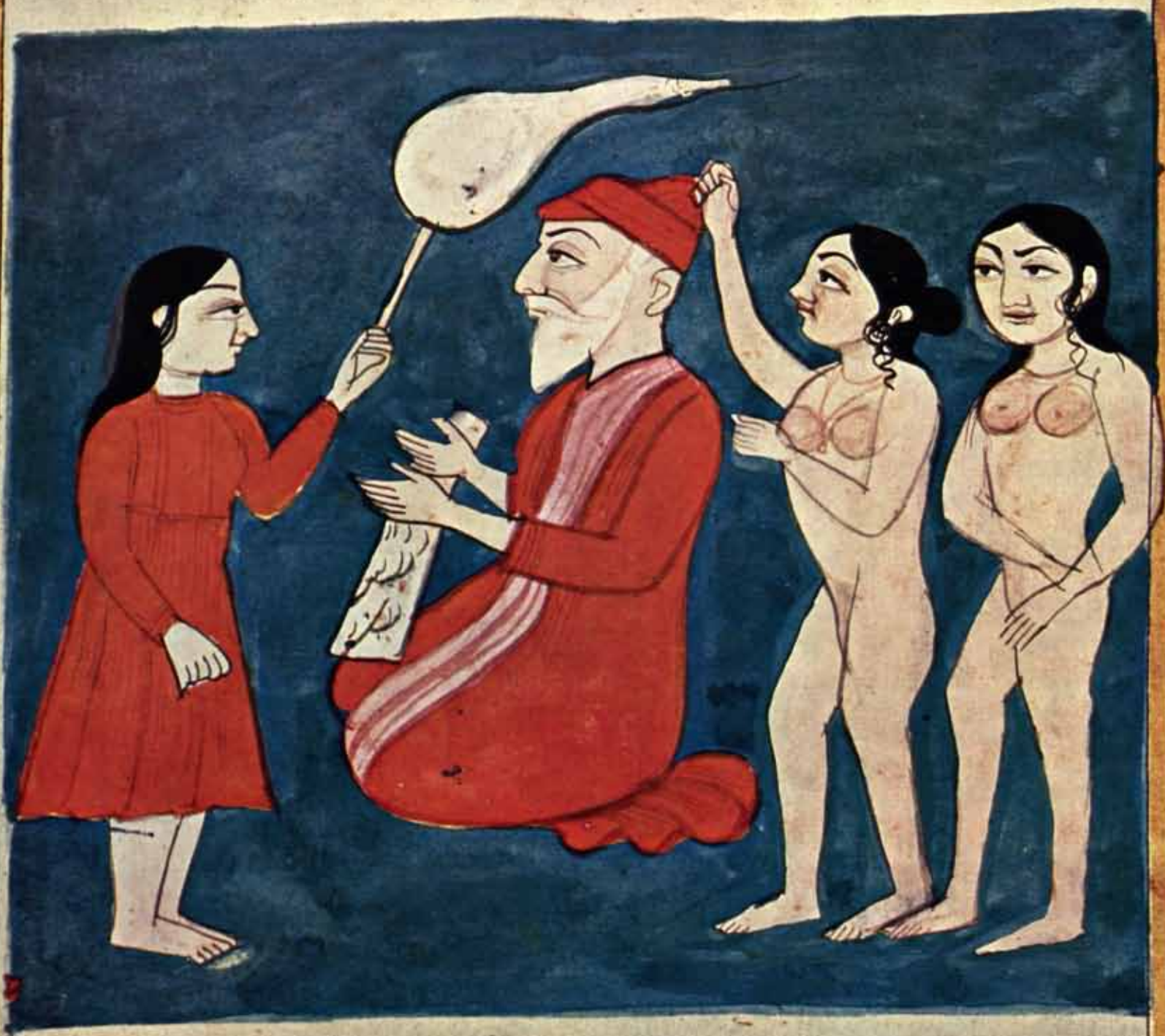








و طبع و ادراک و علوم دقیقه را به محض صاحب و صاحب مدد  
 به حال شایسته صاحب آوراک و حید و فرب و طبیعت و نقایس را به محض  
 و عظم سلیقه نصیحت و علم آن اعلم است و اعلم عند الله و لا یعلم الغیب الا هو و صور



نزدیک به در فلک ز مهره داد بحد خود و سطح است هر دو ستواری



said that they diminish their charms and render them less receptive to the passions of men. Women who have been in the seraglio tell strange tales of the passionate love-making of the females therein, the jealousy between them, and the jealousy of one favourite to another, how furious it may be; and they tell also of their hatreds and their treasons and the evil turns they play. They level charges against one another and are eager against one another's faults. Those who are in the king's good graces, and those who most please him by their singing or dancing or conversation, are the object of the envy and the detestation of the others."

\* \* \*

These accounts by seventeenth-century European travellers relate only to the manners of the upper classes of society. Among the middle class of traders and craftsmen, and still more in the mass of the people, polygamy was limited by the inadequacy of the husband's means. It is clear, too, that in these more modest circles the women—if only because of their domestic responsibilities—had more freedom of movement than their sisters in a higher rank of society, though they were no less closely watched by the men and the older women of their family. But if they were widowed or discarded by their husband they regained their freedom, and we shall see on a later page that some of them were not slow to take advantage of this.

### *Temporary Marriage*

Shi'ite Iran long possessed—and to some extent still possesses—a very peculiar and characteristic institution, that of temporary marriage. Unions of this type, introduced by the Prophet Mohammed in the early days of Islam, but soon abolished by the Sunnite lawyers, are still tolerated by Iranian law. The essential conditions are the payment of a dowry by the husband and the fixing of a period, which can range from "a few moments" to some years. The minimum is "once", and in this case the union is dissolved as soon as it is consummated. Temporary marriage (*mut'a*) was particularly in favour at a time when slow and dangerous communications made it necessary for merchants to spend long periods in distant cities.

In the nineteenth century, when the slave trade was brought to an end, it served another purpose. The ease with which it could be contracted, and its almost complete exemption from the laws of inheritance, encouraged noblemen of advanced years to rejuvenate their harem by taking as *sigheh* (temporary wives) attractive girls from the lower ranks of society. It was a convenient replacement for the concubines who were no longer to be bought.

Nevertheless the principle of the *mut'a* had the highly moral object of preventing prostitution, and its rules were strict. The conception of "once"—which no doubt was frequently abused—carried the



system to its logical extreme, but was by no means looked on with favour by the guardians of the law. To them it was a true marriage in the sight of God, limited only in its duration. They did, however, lay down certain provisos, which were logical enough in the circumstances. Thus although the children of such a marriage were legitimate and belonged to the husband, it might well be that the husband did not want children: the law therefore gave him the right, without the need to obtain his wife's consent, to adopt the practice of *coitus interruptus*. The wife for her part, if she had so stipulated in the contract, was entitled to refuse full intercourse and allow only the most innocent dalliance.

The same authorities reprobated the *mut'a* when it was directed only to the transient satisfaction of the senses, and threw doubt on its validity when it was contracted with women who themselves solicited men or who announced, "by signs placed on the doors of their houses", that they were candidates for temporary marriage. In this they were of course reflecting the abuses which at certain periods distorted the character of an institution of great interest—and one which, according to a thesis recently sustained in the Faculty of Law in Teheran, might with advantage be extended in our own day beyond its traditional geographical domain.

Of the abuses to which the *mut'a* gave rise we can gain some idea from the accounts of the European travellers who visited Iran in the time of the Safavid dynasty. Let us consider another quotation from Chardin:

"And this is the manner in which persons of great scruple conduct themselves. They take a courtesan, hiring her for a period of an hour, a night, a day, a week, or such period as they desire, as I shall tell more fully how they practise in Persia; and with this precaution they say that they can enjoy a public woman in good conscience, believing that such a marriage is as good and lawful as any other. They call this *sike koudim*, signifying literally 'I make the contract of enjoyment', that is, 'I have married'.

"... Women hired in this way are called 'Moutaa d'Amouad', signifying concubine, and also servant. Men may take as many as they will, for as long as they will, and for the price which they grant. At Ispahan, which is the capital of Persia, young and fair women may be hired for four hundred and fifty *livres* a year, with the provision of clothes and food and lodging. This kind of marriage is a purely civil contract, but is entered into before the judge and is as good, lawful and honest as all other contracts of marriage; it is renewed at the end of the term if the parties so agree; and the man is free to break it before the term and to send away the woman he has hired; but when he sends her away he must pay her the full amount agreed in the contract. When a hired woman leaves a man she may not lawfully hire herself, nor allow any other man to approach her, until the passage of forty days. This period is called the 'days of purification'."



شکل پنجم  
هر دو عورت رو برو نشسته از کمان و تیر صوره یاری  
کذا نیست





And Olearius records that—

“... those who are obliged to spend some time away from their habitual residence, and who nevertheless cannot make up their mind to live in public accommodation, take women for a certain time, paying them a certain sum, either by the month or for the whole of the time for which they are together. They call this sort of marriage ‘*Mittehé*’, and to break off such a marriage there is no need of letters of divorce; but rather, the term of the contract having expired, it is dissolved of itself unless by mutual agreement they desire to extend it. The third form of marriage is when a man uses a slave girl whom he has bought, and these are usually Christians from Georgia whom the Tartars of Tagesshan carry off so that they may sell them in Persia. The children born of such marriages, as well as of the *Mittehé*, succeed their father concurrently with the other children.”

### *Public Love*

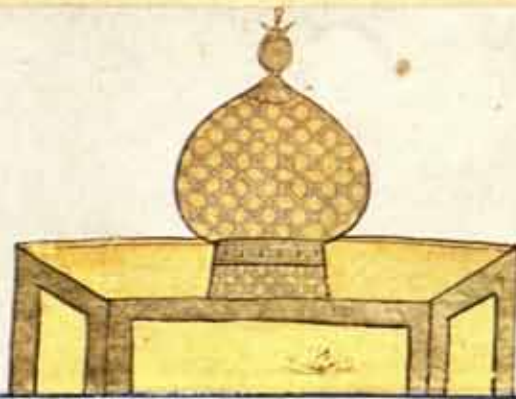
Thus the *mut'a* was sometimes no more than a form of barely concealed prostitution; and this brings us to the subject of a trade which seems to have flourished throughout the whole of the past history of Iran. We have already noted the strictures of Zoroaster himself on harlots, but no doubt these were ineffective; and the interdicts launched by the authorities of Islam were no more heeded.

Apart from the prostitutes themselves there was another large group of women who by tradition enjoyed complete independence. These were the “*motzeb*”, the musicians, singers and dancing girls who were engaged to enliven either family celebrations or the evening parties of exclusively male company. As early as the twelfth century we meet in the romance of adventure *Samak-é-Ayyar* a character named Ruh Afzay, who is herself skilled in these arts and hires out the talents of the troupe of slave girls which she owns.

The *motzeb* were particularly numerous and prosperous in the brilliant capital of the Safavids at Isfahan in the seventeenth century, where their services were continually in demand by the court, rich and avid for pleasure, and by the many foreign visitors. Some groups of artistes were, in fact, attached to the Imperial palace, receiving pensions in money as well as many material advantages. They were employed even on the most official occasions. A fresco in the Pavilion of the Forty Columns in Isfahan represents Shâh Tahmâsp offering an entertainment of this kind to his guest the Great Mogul Humayun. Olearius notes that—

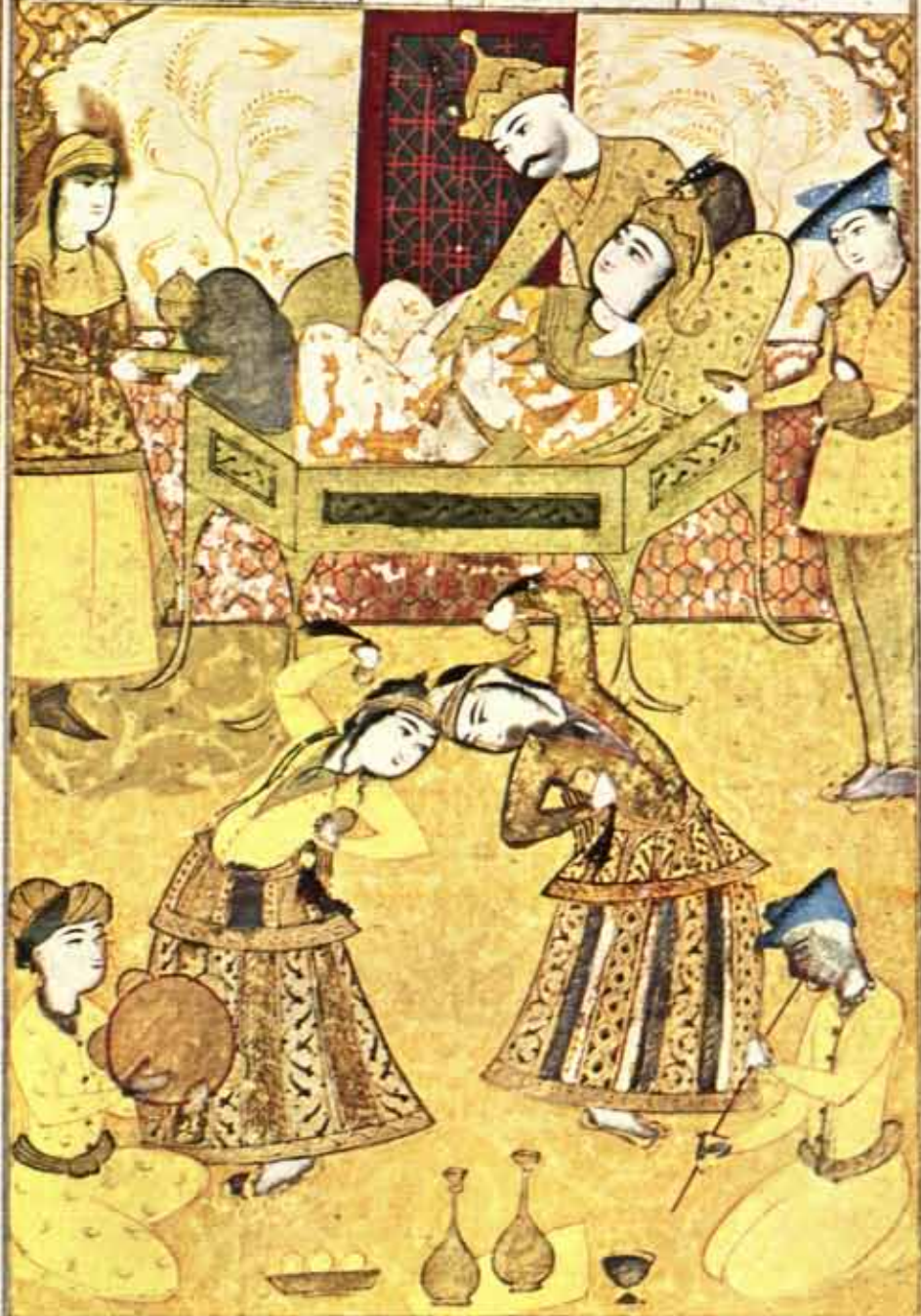
“The king himself has a great number of these women in his pay, and amuses himself at his dinner by causing them to dance and assume all sorts of postures. And so those who desire to take up this trade must not only be fair, but also merry and of great skill. The king takes them with him when he goes into the country, or even to the wars, following in this the example of the ancient kings of Persia, parti-





چون که پادشاه کی در فرشتی	از تو زوی صریح ز کشت	نیکو کردی کشتی را خجالت	نیز زشت به چو افغان
جام زده بر کشت چرخ	بش چرخ زدن بر چرخ	نصف آن به زده بر چرخ	عزیز زاده است و سفا
شده آن اصل کلاف کشت	نکته اصل المهر ز دشت	خوابت لب زده از غزن	در میان کینه می خوش آوری

سپیدین مهر امر گوید  
یکشنبه بگشاید زین



کوی خداوند دوم صین طراز  
کشتی و کشتی پیرانه  
نماز و نسیه بر بوز  
نصفه و نسیه کز بوز



cularly Darius who, as Quintus Curtius tells us, had in his train three hundred and sixty concubines, all very magnificently clad."

The same author describes the reception given to his master the ambassador of the Duke of Holstein when he entered the provincial capital of Qazvin (1637):

"At five hundred paces from the town we met fifteen young women, well mounted, very richly clothed in many kinds of velvet with a base of gold, wearing necklaces of great pearls, ear pendants, and many rings. They had their faces bare, contrary to the custom of honest women in Persia. Thus we soon knew, both by their resolute mien and by what we were told, that these were the principal courtesans of the town, come out to meet us and entertain us with their music. They passed in front of us and sang, mingling their voices with the sound of the hautboys and bagpipes which went ahead of them, making a somewhat extravagant harmony. And so that we might see the town we were conducted through the whole of it and lodged at the other end."

These artistes—musicians, no doubt, but also courtesans when occasion required—were also carefully described by Chardin:

"... Not a feast in Persia or in India but they are summoned to it. The dancing girls are called to all those great occasions that are called *megelez*, that is to say assembly, and to all the audiences given to ambassadors, if not the whole troupe at any rate two-thirds of them, for a number of them are, in turn, exempted from their functions on the plea of indisposition. The plays which they perform are always on amorous subjects.

"The scene is opened by the youngest actresses, who begin by the description of love, depicting its charms and its enchantment, and then represent all its passion and fury, with which they mingle episodes containing portraits of beautiful boys and fair maidens, lively and touching beyond imagination, and this ordinarily makes up the first act. In the second act the troupe is divided into two choruses, one of which represents the pursuit of a passionate lover, the other the repulses he receives from his haughty mistress. The third contains the lovers' agreement, and it is on this theme that the actresses surpass themselves and exhaust their voices and gestures. The singers and players of instruments rise to their feet at the most passionate moments and draw closer to them, sometimes indeed going so far as to cry in their ears to urge them on, which brings them beside themselves and quite transports them; but it is here too that the eyes and the ears which still retain some trace of shame are obliged to turn aside, being unable to sustain the indecency and lasciviousness of these last acts...

"The dancing girls go in troupes, as I have observed. The king's troupe, for example, consists of twenty-four, who are the most famous courtesans in the country. They have a superior, who is ordinarily one who has served her time in the band, but they do not dwell together, being generally dispersed over all the quarters of the town. The function of this superior is to gather them together, to conduct them whither they are summoned, to prevent disputes which jealousy or interest may cause among them or to settle such disputes, to protect them from insult when the







occasion demands, to keep a watch on their conduct and to punish them when they fail to observe the regulations of the troupe. Punishment is by the whip; and if they fall into error a second time the superior cashier them and expels them from the troupe. Finally she has the task of delivering their wages to them, and of ensuring that their garments are rich, their furniture clean and their household in good order as their contract requires. The household of these dancing girls consists of two girls, a lackey, a cook and a groom, with two or three horses. When they follow the court they have four additional horses for their baggage; for in the East those who travel must take everything with them, as if they were going to the wars. One of the horses carries two large trunks, another two portmanteaux, the third is for kitchen equipment and the fourth for food and provender for the other horses. There is no tent included in their equipage, for this is provided for them, or else some lodging, throughout their journey. Their pay is eighteen hundred francs a year, with a certain quantity of materials for their clothing, and a ration of all that is necessary for the feeding of themselves and their train. There are some who have as much as nine hundred crowns, the king increasing their pay according as their persons may be pleasing to him; but all this is but the least part of their emoluments, there being some among them who may sometimes take away fifty pistoles or more from a place where they shall not have stayed twenty-four hours... The king often makes valuable presents to them according as their dancing or other charms move him. The great lords do the same. I recall that being in the year 1665 in Hyrcania, whither I had gone to see Abbas the Second, I saw one evening at the court two of these dancers, each of them wearing on her person more than ten thousand crowns' worth of precious stones; and as I marvelled at seeing them so splendidly adorned they invited me to visit their quarters. Then the next day I went there with my interpreter for I was yet unable to speak Persian, and with a French surgeon. Their apartments were exceeding rich and sumptuous, and since perfumes are the great delight of warm countries they were to be found in much profusion in the house of these courtesans.











میکویند که در خواب





"One thing common to them all is that they are called by a name which marks the price which they charge for a visit, Ten Tomans or Five Tomans or Two Tomans. A toman is worth fifteen crowns of our money. There are none of them who give themselves for less than one toman; and when they are no longer worth this they are put out of the troupe and others take their place. Yet there are hardly any of these women who are rich when they abandon their infamous trade, for they in their turn buy the pleasures they have sold; whereby they impoverish themselves, so that they retain nothing of all this dishonest gain save their repentance for the manner of its acquisition, which is greater than their regret for its dissipation. The troupes of dancers in the provinces are in general of no more than seven or eight girls.

"In Persia the harlots are more easily to be recognised than in any other country in the world, although they go about dressed and veiled like other women. But besides that their veil is shorter and less close, their countenance and bearing make them known at the first glance. Their number is not very great in the provinces but in Ispahan, the capital town, it is excessive. I was told, in the year 1666 when I was there, that there were fourteen thousand of them on the registers; for since they pay tribute, and form a body which has its chief and its officers, they are registered, and the tribute obtained from them amounts to two hundred thousand crowns. I have been assured that there are as many again who will not be registered, so that they may not be known, and that the officers are well content not to register them, for they are then made to pay much more. And yet, although this abominable profession be so large there is no country, I do believe, where the women sell themselves so dear. During the first years of their shameful career they cannot be enjoyed for less than fifteen or twenty pistoles; which cannot be fathomed when we consider, on the one hand, that in Persia men are permitted by their religion to buy girls as slaves and to have as many concubines as they desire, which ought to lower the prices of the harlots; and that on the other young men have little money in their hands, and marry early. The cause of this must be sought in the lecherousness of these warm countries, where the urgings of lust are felt more strongly, and in the arts of these creatures, which are a species of witchcraft. They are blamed, with much justice, for the ruin of the officers and all the young noblemen who frequent the court. It is commonly said in the country that a man who falls in love with a courtesan cannot leave her until she shall send him away; and this they do when they have reduced their lover to his last crown. I have seen men of good sense and probity so deeply entangled in such wretched engagements that they did not believe it possible that they should ever free themselves. They say by way of excuse that they are charmed and bewitched, and they believe most firmly that if they should try to break their chains they would be unable to do so, and that only she who has put the chains on them is able to release them. These slaves of love are to be known by the burns which they bear on their body, and particularly on their arms. They make these marks with a red-hot iron which they apply so firmly to their flesh that the depth of the burn is of the thickness of a thirty-sol piece; and this they do when their



passion is at its most ardent in order to demonstrate to their mistress that the fire of their love renders them insensible to fire itself. The more of these marks a man bears the greater his love is thought to be. There are some men who inflict these burns on all the parts of their body, in particular the loins.

"It is the custom to send money to these women at the time of asking for their services. When they are wanted merely for dancing the client applies to the superior, sending in general two pistoles for each, up to the number required, as it may be six, seven or eight; and if they should dance well they are given presents in addition. When a woman is wanted for the purposes of licentiousness she must be sent her regular price. She comes on horseback, with one or two serving girls and a lackey, and takes away from the place as much as she can compass, over and above her fee."

These dancing girls were not always Persians, but were often foreigners, in particular Indians. Olearius seems to have been particularly susceptible to the exotic charms of the Indian girls:

"... And since we had many times seen the dancing girls of the country they sent for certain Indian dancers. These when they came were six young women, some of them accompanied by their husbands, who practised the same trade or played the fiddle, while others came alone. All the women were of an olive hue, but withal had handsome features, delicate skin, and the whole body marvellously well proportioned. Their necks were laden with gold and pearls and their ears with pendants of gold or silver, full of diamonds and spangles... They were attired in a most singular fashion, in a material so diaphanous that there was no part of their bodies but was exposed to the view of the company, save only those parts which were concealed by the drawers they wore under their skirts... The postures which these Indians take up in dancing are most admirable. Their hands and feet are always in movement, as also is the whole of their body; and many a time they address themselves to only one among the company, either from inclination or to obtain some small present; and they have the art of asking for this with the best grace in the world, stretching out their hand without the least affectation, as if it were a necessary part of the dance. They have incomparably more grace than the women of the country, and a more gay and engaging air withal. All these dancers are harlots, who see no shame in taking up all sorts of postures for money, and indeed are ready to do more than may be demanded of them."

These quotations show that there were no very clear boundaries between the practice of the arts of music and dancing and that of prostitution. Many courtesans, however, saw no necessity for any subterfuges to camouflage the exercise of their trade, and some of them achieved considerable material success, like the famous "Twelve Tomans" of whom Chardin speaks—and with whose career he was well acquainted, having lived in the elegant mansion which she had provided for herself:

"... Turning to the east, you come first to a famous house, which is called the house of Twelve Tomans, as who should say "the house of fifty louis d'or", the toman being a coin worth fifteen crowns. Twelve Tomans was a courtesan who bore







this name because she took that sum the first time a man went to her. On my first visit, in the year 1666, she was a very famous courtesan, both for her beauty and her wealth. Her house, which is not large but is a veritable jewel, consists of a large chamber, two rooms and three little pavilions, each one with two steps, and a number of cabinets and niches, all in different shapes, one place being square, another triangular, another in the form of a cross, another hexagonal. All the ceilings also are of different workmanship. There is not a corner but is painted in gold and azure, and decorated in such a fashion as to incite men to the pleasures of love. I can speak of this house in full knowledge, having dwelt in it in the years 1675 and 1676 by permission of the king; for Christians may not lodge in the city of Ispahan without such permission. They have been relegated to a suburb beyond the river on account of the continual disorders which arose from their being mingled with the Mohammedans. For they were sometimes surprised with Mohammedan women, an offence for which the penalty is death, or the change of the man's religion; and the Mohammedans went to drink in their houses and became drunk, and this also is forbidden, and led to the spilling of blood. All the Christians, therefore, were expelled from the city, saving the missionaries and those from companies in Europe, who being in some sort persons of public position are under the immediate protection of the king...

"Certain lords who came to visit me would often say: 'Ah, if you had but seen this house, as we have seen it, when it was so voluptuously furnished and there were five or six girls of the most admirable beauty, and their mistress who was more beautiful still, it would have seemed to you much more charming than it appears to you today. The door of the house was covered with stout sheets of iron, for one night some young noblemen having sought to enter against the lady's wishes, and not succeeding, caused a pile of wood to be laid in front of the door and set fire to it; which obliged the mistress of the house to have an iron gate constructed. Men said that it was also designed to serve as a sign to mark the house.' This woman had an end worthy of her trade. After earning a great quantity of money she performed *taubé*, as they say in Persia, that is, she did penance and changed her way of living, and no longer offered her body for hire. Then she went on pilgrimage to Mecca and after her return took some girls and kept them as harlots in her house... But since she was still beautiful, though advanced in years, it happened that certain men sought to enjoy her by force—young coxcombs whose passions would not be restrained. She seized a dagger and with it struck the first of them who had laid hands on her, whereupon they drew their weapons and laid her dead on the spot."

We may be sure that not all the courtesans had the qualities of "Twelve Tomans" or lived with the same degree of luxury. Many of them walked the streets in search of custom; others were segregated in particular districts:

"Passing behind these palaces," notes Chardin, "you come to a college which is called the '*Medrezé Sefhivie*', that is to say, college of purity. Yet it is at the entrance to the most infamous district in Ispahan, consisting of three streets and seven large caravanserais, known as the caravanserais of the uncovered ones; for such is the





علاءالملوک در سینه و در سحرش افکار را از



name they give to prostitutes. All this district is full of the commonest of them all, and it is as it were the sewer of that infamous trade. Honest men never pass that way, for then they must submit to the ribaldry that these women address to those who refuse to go into their houses. There are twelve thousand harlots in Ispahan who are on the registers, that is, who pay tribute, without counting those who obtain exemption from it in order to put themselves apart from the rest. And those first mentioned pay eight thousand tomans of tribute, which makes some three hundred and sixty thousand *livres*."

The institution was not a new one. As early as the thirteenth century a chronicler, deploring the decadence of the Seljuk administration, which employed many non-Moslems, wrote: "Taverns and wine-shops were established, and sodomy, adultery and other sins forbidden by the divine law were openly encouraged... Each officer had set up houses of ill fame in ten different places."

The number of prostitutes and the continual scandal they caused in a city like Ispahan were so great that the severest measures of control could do no more than bring a little regularity into the disorder. Once again we have Chardin's account:

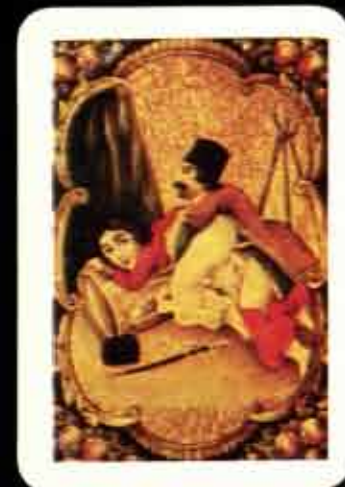
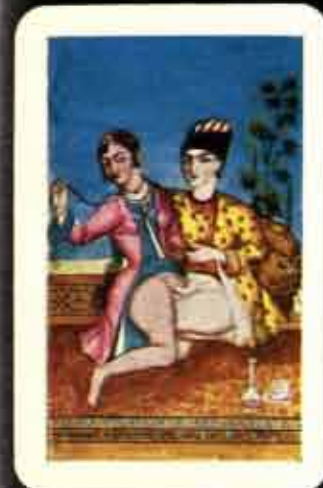
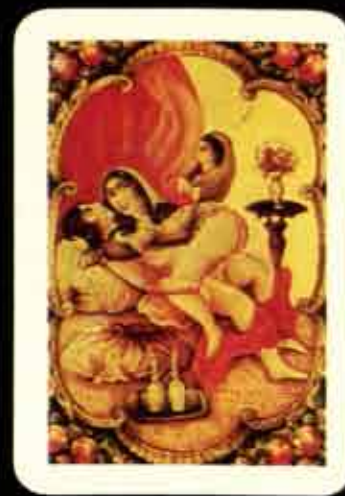
"The prostitutes who pay tribute live in certain caravanserais of which they have seized possession, no one being willing to remain in such company; and those who do not pay tribute live in their own houses; for in Persia there is no question of letting accommodation, or of sharing a house, or of taking furnished apartments. There is moreover a quarter in Ispahan which is full of these women, and which is called 'the district of the uncovered, or unveiled ones'. It was formerly the custom in that royal city, as soon as the evening was come, for these prostitutes, like bands of crows, to range through every part of the city, and particularly in the caravanserais, in search of custom; and what was most infamous of all was that boys were likewise offered publicly for prostitution, being taken about everywhere in the town, dressed in special attire. Sarutaki, who was grand vizier at the beginning of the reign of Abbas the Second, and an old eunuch of sense and good courage, passed strict laws forbidding this unnatural prostitution; and after him Calife Sultan, who followed him in the ministry, and thought to emulate him, made other laws against harlots, forbidding them to offer themselves publicly and to go anywhere without being summoned; and since he judged that the use of wine was the source of these abominable excesses he forbade it to be sold, under severe penalties; in execution of which laws he caused those who prostituted boys to be impaled, and a woman who had prostituted her own daughters was cast from the top of a tower and then eaten by dogs. In this way it was hoped that the country would be purged; but as matters turned out the most severe punishments corrected only the public scandal and the brazenness with which the most abominable crimes flaunted themselves in public places."

Although the seventeenth century, the period of the Safavids, was the golden age of venal love in Iran, the tradition of the great courtesans like "Twelve Tomans"—women of cultivation and refinement, often artistes of considerable accomplishment, surrounded by the homage of their aristocratic lovers—









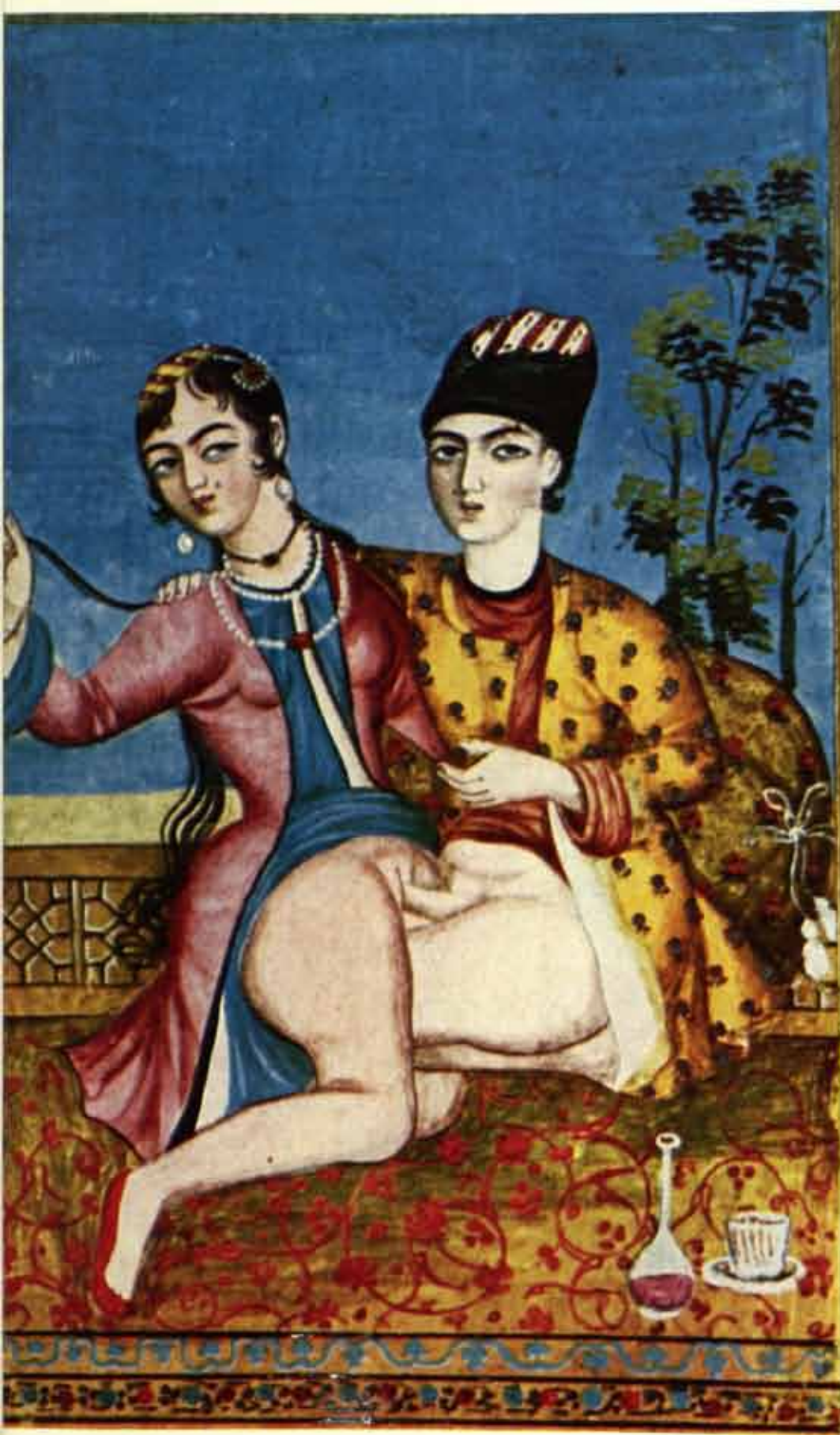


















continued right up<sup>7</sup> to the threshold of our own time, in the Teheran of the Kajars, and the amorous chronicles of that dynasty preserve the names of some of them, including several of the highest standing. Mohtasem-é-Shirâzî, who flourished in the reign of Muzaffar al-Dîn, and Azîz-é-Kâshî and Amîr Zâdeh, who adorned that of Ahmed Shâh, all lived in the most splendid style and are said to have been the ruin of many a noble house. The same is reported of Qamar-ol-Muluk ("The full moon of kings"), whose voice will never be forgotten by those who are old enough to have had the privilege of hearing her singing the poems of Khayyam and Hâfiz under the stars in some beautiful mountain garden, in the company of friends who, like her, are no longer with us. She was the last of the great ladies.



## THE PLACE OF BOYS

Although, as we have seen, they were by no means indifferent to the charms of women, the Persians of past centuries rated highly the pleasure to be had from the enjoyment of handsome boys: a pleasure which in their eyes seemed entirely natural. Did not the Emir Kai-Kâ'ûs recommend his son to "use boys in summer and girls in winter"?

As far back as we can trace in history catamites, like prostitutes, formed a recognised and accepted group in the courts and society of ancient Iran. From the Middle Ages to the Safavid period the rulers and the great men of the kingdom possessed, in addition to their harems, greater or lesser numbers of male slaves, the *ghelmân* (plural of *gholâm*), boys acquired at the tenderest age from the Turkish tribes of Central Asia, and later from the Caucasus. The prices paid for these boys were often very high. The boy mentioned in the anecdote from the *Qâbûs-nâma* which has already been quoted had cost two thousand pieces of gold and had come all the way from Bukhara, many hundreds of miles distant.

'Ubaid-i Zâkânî, in his *Epistle of the Hundred Precepts*, declares: "Young Turkish slave boys, so long as they are beardless, should be bought at whatever price they are to be had. As soon as their beard comes, sell them for what you can get." They were undoubtedly a costly luxury. Often, it is true, the merchants who traded in these *ghelmân* educated them with great care—just as they taught music, dancing and poetry to the most beautiful girls who were destined for princely harems—so that intellectual accomplishments should be added to their physical attractions and thus enhance their price.

The slaves who served as pages at court could look forward to a great future if they were fortunate enough to find favour. Many of them became army commanders, grand viziers or ministers, and there were some who rose as high as the throne itself, like the Emir Subuktâgîn, founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty. The majority of them, on reaching the age when the beard begins to grow, were enlisted in the royal bodyguard.



Only the great ones of the kingdom were able to acquire and retain the handsomest of the *ghelmân*. Ordinary mortals had to be content with the favours—whether granted freely or on payment of a fee (of two pieces of silver, as we learn from the licentious poems of Suzanî and ‘Ubaid)—of such boys as offered themselves publicly, at the risk of meeting with rebuffs or with misadventures more disagreeable still. These practices were frowned on both by the law of Zoroastrianism and of Islam, and in spite of the general laxity of morals there were occasions when the severity of a prince or the zeal of some official led to severe exemplary punishment. Sa’dî relates the misadventure of a *cadi* of Hamadan who was surprised by the governor of the place with a young blacksmith. The governor ordered the guilty magistrate to be cast down from the top of the citadel; whereupon the man of law contrived to save his skin by the quickness of his wit, suggesting that the authorities should execute instead, for his own edification, one of the many other citizens known to practise the same vice.

Chardin, however, tells us the story of an officer in the service of Shâh Safi who was less fortunate:

“Sarutaki was the son of a baker in Tauris, capital of Media, who having no means of advancing him in life, sent him to Ispahan to seek his fortune. He went there and became a soldier, thinking he could find no better employment to show off the excellence of his parts. For his misfortune, however, his first comrades were young profligates given to the horrid crime of sodomy, who infected him with it so strangely that he was not content to fall into the same disorder as they, but carried matters so far that he was fain to ravish any handsome boy whom he encountered in unfrequented places. It happened after two years that an officer in the king’s service, seeing that he was fit for better things than carrying a musket, took him as his secretary; but he had not been three months in this employment when a boy from the district who had been lost for a week was discovered in his chamber in the state of one who has been violently ravished. The parents of the boy, provoked beyond measure by the manner in which he had handled their son, cast themselves at the feet of the king while he was taking his walk and called on him to exact retribution for the horrid deed. The king, who was in a merry and amiable humour, said to them, smiling: ‘Go, then, and castrate him.’ And they, carried away by rage, took the king at his very word, ran off to the man’s house and, meeting him as he was about to go riding, accompanied only by a lackey, threw him down to the ground, tore his garments, and in an instant carried out the king’s order, with all the fury that men so incensed may be supposed to feel; for so it is in Persia, that each man avenges with his own hands the wrongs done to him, so soon as the court orders it or permits it.

“Sarutaki’s master was with the king when the complaint was made and the punishment ordered; and when he saw that the prince spoke somewhat sportively of the decree which he had just issued, and smiled as he looked at him, he made bold to reply, smiling likewise: ‘In truth, Sire, it were a pity that this unhappy young man should die, for he is a man of excellent parts and might render great service to Your Majesty in time to come.’ On this the king replied: ‘Let him be saved, then,



if there is still time, or let him be tended for his hurt.' The king's pardon arrived too late, for the sentence had already been executed; but the criminal was so far fortunate that he did not die of the operation, as is like to occur to those past the age of eighteen years. But since the operation had been performed with a large knife, and by men in a great fury, who did not take care how they did it, he was never thereafter properly cured: his water ran down his thighs, which required him all his life to wear boots which reached as high as the place of the parts which he had lost.

"His punishment having rendered him incapable of any further profligacy, Sarutaki applied himself to business, and by the time ten years had passed made himself so skilled in finance that he was appointed comptroller general to the vizier, or intendant, of Mazenderan, which is Hyrcania, and when he came to die Sarutaki was put in his place. He was then made governor of Guilan, which is a neighbouring province, and was employed as general and commissary-general in several positions of great importance. From there he rose to be nazir—which is the name given to the superintendent-general or master of the king's household and of all his domain—and finally to be first minister of state."

It is fair to add that a contemporary traveller, Olearius, refers to this story and states that the victim "was not punished for that crime", but because of his use of violence. We have already (page 160) come across this same Sarutaki, who had become a sadder and a wiser man as a result of his own misadventure and had risen to become responsible for the policing of Ispahan, taking stringent measures against the prostitution of boys.

\* \* \*

From the writings of the Emir Kai-Kâ'ûs, whose paternal counsels we have already had occasion to consider, it is clear that true love—*l'amour de cœur*—was not, as a rule, inspired by a woman, but by some handsome youth. In the higher ranks of society women, whether wives or slaves, waited in the *enderun* (women's quarters) on their master's pleasure. There was nothing else they could do: there were no rival claimants for their favours, and however ready they might be to seek diversion elsewhere they could not hope to evade the close surveillance of the eunuchs. Their master had, therefore, no need to win their good graces or even to make himself agreeable to them. And as for women belonging to any other social class, whether artistes or courtesans, it was only necessary to pay them. Thus, deprived as they were of any freedom of action, women ceased to be the main object of amorous desire. Romantic passion was now inspired by those adolescent youths whose beauty and charm enlivened male social gatherings. The whole of classical literature bears witness to this, in particular the anecdotes—often decidedly indelicate—in such collections as Sa'di's *Gulistân* ("Rose-garden") and *Bûstân* ("Orchard") and Jâmi's *Bahâristân* ("Spring Garden").



The adolescent youth—beardless, or with only the first shadow of down on his lip (*khatt-é-sabz*, the green line)—is petted and pampered by a host of admirers; he pours out wine for the company, playing the important part of the *sâghî*; he has poems dedicated to him, full of fervid passion. And he in turn takes pleasure in exciting rivalries and jealousies by his coquetry (*nâz*) and his caprices. There are countless anecdotes to illustrate the insolent pride of these spoiled boys.

Jâmî tells an edifying tale about the capricious behaviour of a *shâhed* for whom a whole monastery of dervishes felt a love which may have been something less than platonic:

"There was a handsome boy who had wound the noose of desire round the neck of the dervishes and had become, as it were, the point on the circle in the assembly of the Sufis.

*Quatrain*

"Towards his face they turned for prayer, the men who seek God;  
For love of God they turned their faces to him.  
Those who wore the hair shirt, before this adolescent so sweet of speech, were like  
flies in front of sugar.  
Each one wanted to be close to him, each one adorned himself to receive him, so  
that their rivalries led to quarrels.

*Verses*

"It is quite in the nature of lovers to fight among themselves  
When they are rivals for the love of a fair one.  
Those who aspire to visit the Kaaba, if passion excites their desire,  
May well come to blows.

"The superior of the *khâneghâh*<sup>1</sup>, who was no less involved than the others, and was unable to conceal his desires, sent for the boy and set to giving him advice: 'My son,' he said, 'talented and charming as you are, you must cease mingling with all and sundry as sugar mingles with milk. Cease, therefore, tying on everyone the halter of deceit, whether he merits your interest or not. *You are a mirror in which God is reflected.* It would be a pity if your face were to light up at sight of anyone, lacking head or feet as he might be.'

*Quatrain*

"Do not yield up the bridle you wear into the hands of the unworthy,  
Do not admit the vulgar throng into your private dwelling.  
Your face is a mirror most carefully polished:  
Take care you do not rust this limpid mirror.

"Having heard these counsels, the sweet youth felt a certain bitterness, and, with a frown on his face, rose and went out. Making some excuse, he left the *khâneghâh* and did not return for some days. The superior and his disciples were filled

<sup>1</sup> Monastery of dervishes.



with sorrow by reason of his going, and with despair in consequence of his departure. With the diamond of their eyelashes they pierced the jewel of distress and misfortune (that is, tears) and repeated in the language of penitence:

*Verses*

Return, for no one can lay down the law to thee, fair youth:  
Grant thy company to whom thou wilt, refuse it to whom thou wilt.

"The young man then deigned to accept the apologies of the dervishes, forgot his anger, and returned to the company of the sorrowing Solitaries and Separated Ones.

*Quatrain*

After four things which are granted by the beloved,  
Four things are better than rest and mercy after torment:  
Union after separation, concord after disagreement,  
Peace after a dispute, contentment after blame."

But a lover who had been scorned was often able to take his revenge when the haughty youth's cheeks began to show the first growth of beard, and he was reduced to soliciting what he had previously taken delight in refusing. "Never accept wine from the hands of a bearded *sâghî*," recommends 'Ubaid-i Zâkânî, who devotes a whole poem, the *Rîsh-nâma* ("Book of the Beard"), to this deplorable transformation. Elsewhere he describes the displeasure felt by a Moslem "ascetic" on returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca to find that the young monk in a Christian monastery in Syria to whom he had paid court as a beardless youth before his departure had now grown a beard. The theme is one very frequently found. We may quote another anecdote from Jâmî on this subject:

"There was a youth whose beauteous face reduced a thousand learned men to distraction, and whose chamber was continually thronged with a noisy crowd of admirers. Then the age of beauty passed from him, and the shame of ugliness fell upon him. The lovers thereupon folded up the carpet of their contentment and withdrew the foot of visitation. Then I said to one of them: 'And yet it is the same youth as last year: he has the same eyes, the same brows, the same lips, the same teeth. It is true that he has increased in stature, and that his body is more vigorous. What impudence, what shame, what irreverence to cease to visit him and desire his company!'

"He answered me: 'For the love of heaven, what are you saying? What delighted my heart and caused me to lose my reason was a soul enclosed in a mould made up of well-proportioned limbs, the harmony of the body, the softness of the skin, the sweetness of the breath. And when the soul is separated from that mould, how can I feel love for a dead body? What poems can I sing to a withered rose?'



#### *Quatrain*

"When the rose in the garden has faded, what use are the thorn and the stem?  
When the king has left the city, what purpose in defending it?  
Beauty is a cage and its charm a beauteous bird:  
When the beauteous bird has flown, what value has the cage?"

#### *Other Forms of Love*

Persian erotic pictures sometimes represent men coupling with animals. Must we conclude from this that bestiality also had its adepts? Miniatures of this kind seem rather to belong to the world of fantasy, or are used to illustrate licentious verse or bawdy tales.

Suzanî, in his desire to shock and to establish a reputation for wickedness, frequently affects to sing of his passion for asses. We know, however, that he preferred boys.

Sa'dî, in his *Majâlis of Hazal*, makes one of his characters say, in answer to a series of coarse and pointless questions, that if at the end of the day nothing can be made even of an ass the only resource that remains is to take a piece of soap and go to the baths in quest of the pleasure later to be celebrated by Zâkânî in his *Jalk-nâma*.

This last poet also recounts the misadventure of a village preacher who was surprised by his son, one Thursday morning, with the family donkey. On the following day, when the pious elder was in process of exhorting his flock, the child threw open the door of the mosque and cried: "Father, do you want to .... the ass, or shall I take it to the fields?"

The miniature reproduced on page 132 of this book illustrates an anecdote—intended to be edifying—which Jâmî relates briefly in his *Silsilat al-dhahab*, "The Golden Chain" (text dated 1405, manuscript 1556): "The tale of the profligate who, having failed to enjoy a camel, provoked the Devil to swear that never would such a stratagem have come into his head".

Jâmî seeking to convince his reader that the perversity of man may sometimes exceed the malignity of the Demon, writes:

"A certain profligate pursuing the satisfaction of his desires made his way to the desert. Perceiving a she-camel, he sought at once to enjoy her. The animal, however, resisted, refusing to crouch as he wished her. Being unable to achieve his ends by other means, the man tied a stick across her hocks and, using it as a ladder, had soon done his business. Iblis, his gorge rising at the deed, cried: 'O infamous one, what have you done? This is the very essence of a hundred thousand shames. Any man, be he citizen or craftsman, who may have seen you in that obscene and shameful position will in his ignorance curse me even before he thinks shame of you. I call God to witness that, although my stubbornness and my rebellion may have





caused me to be rejected by Adam and by all men, no such stratagem as this has ever been conceived in my heart, no such shameful action has ever occurred to my mind.'"

In fact, apart from homosexuality—in which, we must always remember, the Persians, like the Greeks, saw nothing abnormal or distasteful—Iran does not seem to have known those perversions which are so frequently found in the erotomania of the West. At any rate we find no substantial evidence of them in the written sources.



## CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to define the rôle of love in the civilisation of ancient Iran—though it cannot claim to have exhausted this vast subject. Based on a distinctive and sometimes unusual pattern of psychological factors, aesthetic standards and motives, the manifestations of the passion of love fluctuated continually, through all their variety of form and expression, between the two extremes of mysticism and crude lust. Love in Persia is only rarely that giving of one's own self, that quest of happiness in the union of one body and soul with another, which is the ideal of love in the West. It is, rather, desired and practised for its own sake and as an end in itself, either for the physical joys of possession which combine with wine, poetry and music to sweeten the bitterness of human life, or—in the most delicate and refined minds—as a method of asceticism, the contemplation of earthly beauty opening up the vision of the supreme Beauty, and worldly passion being merely the threshold leading to mystical passion.

These two opposing attitudes reflect the uncertainties which left their mark on the Persian soul during thousands of years of invasion, civil war and arbitrary government. Neither the mightiest ruler nor the poorest wretch could be sure what the morrow might bring, and all alike felt the need of some refuge from the hazards of life, either in the unrestrained enjoyment of the pleasures of this world, or in the elevations of spiritual philosophy, or in a harmonious equilibrium between these consolations of the body and the mind.

The position of women in a society which in certain respects was so rigid and in others so free also helped to determine some of the most distinctive features of the practice of love in ancient Iran.

*Autres temps, however, autres mœurs;* and, we may add, other fashions in love. Western ideas began to penetrate into the Persia of the Kajars about the middle of the nineteenth century, and soon



a powerful movement of opinion developed in favour of reforms of all kinds. Iran received its first constitution in 1906, but this was no more than the first step in the revolution which was to transform the whole country. Already daring spirits were demanding the social rehabilitation of women and, to begin with, the abolition of the *châdor*, the veil with which women covered their faces when they left their houses.

The poet Irâj Mîrzâ (1874–1926) had no doubt that the veil was responsible for all the defects of his country, and in particular for the practice of unnatural vice—a practice to which, incidentally, he was by no means averse. In any case, he added, the veil was but a weak rampart for feminine virtue; and he went on to relate the tale of his encounter with a beautiful girl whom he enticed into his house on some pretext or other and who granted him all he asked—whereupon he recounts his triumph without sparing us any detail—but still refused to uncover her face.

The veil covered the woman's hair and hung down to her feet like a long cloak; but it is fair to say that on occasion it might fall gradually open, and the pretty hands which kept it in place over the wearer's face might sometimes practise the art of manipulating it so as to reveal the flash of a black eye, to show the flicker of a smile, or perhaps to convey some more positive message.

But the prejudices inherited from the past died hard, and it needed all the authority of Rezâ Shâh, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, to abolish the *châdor* in 1937. This was certainly a decisive moment in history for Iran. Those who lived through this period can still recall the public reaction, and in particular the dismay of the women of Teheran who, deprived of the familiar protection of the veil, felt almost naked when they had to appear in public in European dress.

Persian women of the present day have passed beyond these difficulties. They follow the most advanced fashions from Paris, take a full part in social life, work if they want to or are obliged to, and meet men on an equal footing. All this has brought them increased respect and no less admiration; and if Herodotus were alive today he would undoubtedly note a striking decline in certain practices favoured by the Greeks of his day. And at the same time the women of modern Iran are no longer afraid to proclaim their right to give their love and to receive love as they will.

In their honour, just as the *Naurûz-nâma* ends, "for a good omen", with the chapter on "fair faces", so this book shall end with a poem by the young woman poet Forough-é-Farrokhzâd:



"I have sinned—voluptuously sinned  
In a warm and fiery embrace.  
I have sinned lying in arms  
Burning, vengeful, and strong as iron.

In this retreat of shadow and silence  
I looked into his eyes, mysterious and secret,  
And my heart in my breast trembled with impatience  
At the prayer in his suppliant eyes.

In this retreat of shadow and silence,  
Troubled, I sat down by his side.  
His lip against my lip released the flood of desire.  
Freed from the grief of my maddened heart,

I whispered in his ear the tale of love:  
I want you. My adored one.  
I want you, my embrace of life.  
You. My mad lover.

Desire glowed in his eyes;  
The red wine danced in the glass;  
In the soft bed my body  
Trembled in ecstasy under his breast.

I have sinned, voluptuously sinned,  
With a tremulous, distracted beauty.  
Do I know, O my God, what I have done  
In this retreat of shadow and silence?"



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